

# **How an Introductory Survey of Business Course Can be Used to Teach First Year/Freshman Success Skills and Business Discipline Integration**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The business community has made it clear that the ever changing environment of the workplace demands that students' educational experience be more comprehensive, integrated, data driven, and competency based. In response to these challenges, three areas of business school curriculum have been the focus of ongoing course redesign: 1) student understanding of the integrated nature of business decision making, 2) student appreciation of the value of lifelong learning and high levels of productivity, and 3) student development of the skills necessary to succeed both while in school and upon entering the workforce. Competitive pressures on higher education institutions also mandate emphasis on these areas at the freshman level rather than waiting until the senior-level capstone courses. In an attempt to meet these challenges, an innovative freshman survey of business course was designed to expand students' level of participation, increase their level of knowledge transfer, provide opportunities to develop competencies and skills, and provide a real world activity through a business/education partnership. This paper provides an explanation of the course design; four (4) years of quantitative data regarding retention and students' perception of their competencies; future plans/revisions of this course; and the real business/education partnership.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The business community has made it clear that the ever changing environment of the workplace demands that students' educational experience be more comprehensive, integrated, data driven, and competency based. (Flanegin & Rudd, 2000; Potter & Maccaro, 2000). In response to these challenges, three areas of the University of South Dakota business school curriculum have been the focus of ongoing course redesign: 1) student understanding of the integrated nature of business decision making, 2) student appreciation of the value of lifelong learning and high levels of productivity, and 3) student development of the skills necessary to succeed both while in school and upon entering the workforce.

Competitive pressures on higher education institutions also mandate emphasis on these areas at the freshman level rather than waiting until the senior-level capstone courses. (Boyer Commission Report, 1998; VanOver & Stover, 2003). In an attempt to meet these challenges, an innovative survey of business course was designed to expand students' level of participation, increase their level of knowledge transfer, provide opportunities to develop competencies and skills, and provide a real world activity through a business/education partnership.

This paper provides an explanation of the course design; four (4) years of quantitative data regarding retention and students' perception of their competencies; future plans/revisions of this course; and the real business/education partnership.

### **Course Design**

In 1995, selected faculty from the University of South Dakota (USD) School of Business began to redesign a BADM 101 Survey of Business course which is offered to both business students and students in other disciplines. Students generally take this course during their freshman or sophomore years of college. Traditionally the course followed the lecture model. Based on input from the Business School Advisory Board, alumni, employers, the AACSB visitation teams, and a review of the literature, the redesign of the

course moved in a more innovative and integrative direction. A conscious decision was made to move to a model more in keeping with the identified workplace competencies/skills determined in 1991 by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), with orientation toward application/practice and student directed teaching strategies. (Anderson-Lewis & King, 1996; Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1999; Maes, et al, 1997; and Mikulecky, 1997)

The focus of the course was the CAVES Model of content, attitudes, values, ethics, and skills related to business and economics which was developed by the course designer. The course was team taught and used a variety of teaching strategies and assessments to determine the students' competencies prior to, during, and upon completion of the course. Strategies included incentive systems, career strategy paper/presentation, extemporaneous speeches, informal discussions, case studies, guest lecturers, and opportunities for personal development outside of class. Students kept a class portfolio and were involved in a mid-semester and end of semester "one-on-one" interview with the instructors. Since most of the students were in the beginning of their program, guest lecturers were encouraged to teach a portion of the class in order for students to become familiar with Business School faculty from different disciplines. Lectures both formal and informal also reinforced the concept of integration of disciplines.

Representatives from various campus resources ( i.e. library, student enrichment center) spoke to the class and provided information regarding the various services and resources available to students. Because of the revised course design, the course satisfied the first year experience institutional requirement and, along with business concepts, gave students several opportunities to enhance their skills and become integrated into the business school and the community.

Each teaching strategy and student activity provided students the opportunity to expand their level of participation and thereby increase their level of knowledge transfer as set out by Bloom and his colleagues (1956). Moreover, using a contemporary view of competency based education, students also had opportunities to develop competencies and skills in four basic areas as set out by Evers, et al (1998): Managing Self; Communicating; Managing People and Tasks; and, Mobilizing Innovation and Change.

Due to the curriculum changes and resource constraints, further modification of BADM 101 changed the course from a team taught format to single instructors working cooperatively with a BADM 101 coordinator and the 101 team. Each faculty member was a volunteer (with workload credit) and each represented a different discipline. During the pilot phase, a common BADM 101 core curriculum was created to assist the faculty. This package included faculty involvement and training, plus lesson plans and instructional material. The curriculum package also contained the connection with the Real Business Project (EWL, Inc.). The goal of the project was to provide a real world activity for beginning level students that illustrates the business as an "enterprise". This business/education partnership served as a framework for enhanced integration of the breath of concepts inherent in an introductory level business course.

The Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) students, along with the Business School, formed a real 501(c)3 business, EWL, Inc. and the students in BADM 101 were EWL, Inc. employees. In the beginning two businesses were started. One business involved designing and selling University logo items to promote the university and the second involved printing and selling of innovative class schedules. SIFE members served as executive managers and coordinated the business activities with faculty who integrated them into their courses. Faculty used the business activities as "living case studies" and students in those classes received course assignments tied to the business activities. BADM 101 students gained valuable hands-on experience and were able to make a connection between the theories introduced in class and the application of those theories. This living case study is intended to be a resource for students beyond the BADM 101 experience. More often than not, it helped students decide if a business career was truly the career path they wanted.

Weekly meetings of the teaching team were held for formative evaluation and adjustment of course strategies. Collectively, the information spotted challenges early and helped faculty make changes when needed. All faculty involved, no matter what their rank, found the team approach a way to increase and maintain quality instruction.

## Course Evaluation

Evaluation of the BADM 101 Survey of Business took place in several areas. Pre/Post surveys were administered to determine students' perceptions of their skills in various areas. The composite results of the thirty-eight (38) self evaluation items showed in 2003 twelve (12) items had a significant positive change at the .001 level of significance and thirteen (13) items had a significant positive change at the .01 level of significance; in 2004 three (3) items had a significant positive change at the .001 level of significance and ten (10) items had a significant positive change at the .01 level of significance; in 2005 twenty-six (26) items had a significant positive change at the .001 level of significance and six (6) items had a significant positive change at the .01 level of significance; and in 2006 twenty-five (25) items had a significant positive change at the .001 level of significance and four (4) items had a significant positive change at the .01 level of significance.

The item integrate/synthesize information had a significant positive change at the .001 level of significance for all four years. The items interpersonal communication, participate in class discussions, explain information, form study groups, analyze information, evaluate information, solve problems, take advantage of academic/cultural opportunities, participate in leadership activities, and consider ethics before making a decision had a significant positive change at the .001 or .01 level of significance for all four years. Table 1 reflects the areas of change for all four years in more detail.

The nationwide retention rate is 73.6% (Education Commission of the States, 2005), the statewide retention rate for South Dakota is 64% (National Report Card on Higher Education, 2006). Using university records, research was conducted focusing on BADM 101 student retention rates. For entering freshmen in a fall semester who enrolled in the following fall semester the retention rates were: Fall 03-USD-68% 101-79%; Fall 04 USD-69% 101-85%; Fall 05 USD-71% 101-88%; and Fall 06 USD 72% and 101-87%. These research results show that BADM 101 students remain at USD at a higher rate than other students.

At the end of the course, students completed an overall course evaluation, including the EWL, Inc. project. Students were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction, experience and impression of the EWL project. On a scale from 1(low) to 7(high), over half (68%) of students rated their overall experience 4 or higher. Rating specific EWL/SIFE experiences on a scale of 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree), students agreed/strongly agreed that they received adequate direction (53%); that opportunities were provided to ask questions (71%); that the project was relevant to course content (58%) and a good source for practical application (53%); that process for job selection/assignment was efficient and fair (58%); and, that it is fair for students to accept responsibility for execution of the EWL project (61%).

Formative evaluation of the course took place each semester with input from faculty, students and members of the business community. This input, along with the research concerning first year experience (Cohen, 2000; Lifton, et al, 2000; Bobrowski, et al 2004), integrated business curriculum (Flanegin & Rudd, 2000; LeMaster, et al, 2000; Potter & Maccaro, 2000; Carmichael & Caldwell, 2002; Strempek, et al, 2004; Atchison, et al, 2005), and retention (Education Commission of the States, 2005; Lifton, et al, 2004; National Report Card on Higher Education, 2006), has resulted in changes to the original redesigned curriculum and supports the view of continuous improvement or "always a work in progress." By Fall of 2006, these changes included pre/post surveys regarding content and perceptions of skills/attitudes, use of integrated business systems, involvement of the business community, addition of electronic portfolios, and request that the course be required of all business school students.

Due to the unique structure of the course and the number of evaluation instruments, only information pertinent to this discussion has been extrapolated. Copies of all instruments can be obtained by contacting [lroach@usd.edu](mailto:lroach@usd.edu).

	Fall 03	Fall 04	Fall 05	Fall 06
<u>Item</u>	<u>Pre/Post</u>	<u>Pre/Post</u>	<u>Pre/Post</u>	<u>Pre/Post</u>
Write clearly	2.76/3.04**	2.84/3.13*	2.88/3.19**	2.89/3.10*
Use the computer	3.14/3.27	3.16/3.39*	3.28/3.40	3.29/3.51**
Communicate using e-mail	3.35/3.67***	3.37/3.63	3.49/3.70**	3.39/3.66***
Speak confidently in public	2.45/2.90***	2.47/2.76*	2.56/2.77	2.39/2.86***
Interpersonal communication	2.79/3.19***	2.89/3.24**	2.67/3.19***	2.86/3.16***
Take initiative to get questions answered	2.69/3.10***	2.87/2.89	2.53/3.14***	2.45/2.84***
Participate in class discussions	2.58/2.88**	2.50/2.95**	2.33/3.12***	2.45/2.84***
Explain information	2.77/3.11**	2.61/3.05**	2.64/3.14***	2.64/2.95***
Ask questions in class	2.33/2.82	2.24/2.92***	2.31/2.88***	2.32/2.76***
Seek learning opportunities outside class	2.33/2.79***	2.47/2.76	2.35/3.00***	2.29/2.83***
Form study groups	2.00/2.45**	1.92/2.55***	2.00/2.56***	1.89/2.24***
Collaborate with other students	2.83/3.10**	2.74/3.05	2.47/3.00***	2.74/2.98**
Work and think independently	3.12/3.35*	3.34/3.61	3.16/3.49***	3.37/3.50
Search for info w/library resources	2.57/2.80	3.00/3.24	2.42/2.95***	2.59/2.95***
Search for info using Internet	3.53/3.47	3.50/3.66*	3.37/3.56	3.27/3.53***
Analyze information	2.80/3.20***	2.89/3.26**	2.74/3.24***	2.77/3.21***
Evaluate information	2.85/3.21***	2.87/3.21**	2.70/3.21***	2.69/3.19***
Integrate/synthesize information	2.35/2.88***	2.53/2.97***	2.51/3.05***	2.47/2.91***
Make informed decisions	3.08/3.33**	2.92/3.18*	2.91/3.23**	2.95/3.34***
Study for my courses	3.00/3.10	2.95/3.21	2.81/3.35***	2.92/3.19**
Organize myself	3.22/3.18	3.39/3.24	2.98/3.40***	3.11/3.32
Budget my time efficiently	3.06/3.02	3.08/2.97	2.72/3.09**	2.77/3.00*
Prepare for class	3.08/3.10	3.26/3.29	3.09/3.23	3.06/3.20
Attend class regularly	3.73/3.50**	3.63/3.63	3.77/3.58	3.74/3.65
Solve problems	3.08/3.33***	3.13/3.42**	2.88/3.23***	2.96/3.16**
Make connection between courses/world	2.98/3.17	2.87/2.94	2.50/3.21***	2.73/3.29***
Interact with faculty members	2.56/2.83**	2.66/2.82	2.33/2.86***	2.50/2.83***
Take advantage of USD resources	2.75/2.98	2.79/3.05*	2.44/3.05***	2.60/2.96***
Take advantage of Vermillion resources	2.50/2.65	2.55/2.79	2.23/2.81***	2.33/2.50
Respect different points of view	3.14/3.41**	3.18/3.42**	3.21/3.44*	3.29/3.39
Interact w/ persons from other cultures/backgrounds/beliefs	2.94/3.19*	3.13/3.37*	2.86/3.29***	3.24/3.34
Take advantage academic/cultural opps.	2.55/2.84**	2.63/3.00**	2.56/3.00***	2.63/3.00***
Identify career objectives	2.77/3.13***	3.00/3.24	2.70/3.23***	2.82/3.22***
Identify academic objectives	2.94/3.29***	3.11/3.32	2.95/3.26***	2.92/3.33***
Participate in leadership activities	2.50/2.90***	2.61/3.03**	2.49/3.05***	2.51/2.90***
Identify and resolve conflict	2.88/3.21**	2.95/3.18*	2.81/3.19**	2.82/3.17***
Consider ethics before making a decision	2.94/3.23**	2.87/3.29**	2.88/3.33**	2.92/3.42***
Identify impact of alternative decisions on other people, business operations, and the environment	2.92/3.25**	2.87/3.16*	2.74/3.33***	2.75/3.21***

\* p&lt;.05

\*\*p&lt;.01

\*\*\*p&lt;.001

### Future Plans/Revisions

Future plans for the real business/education partnership include:

Graduates of BADM 101 will be assigned an electronic portfolio obligation that will require students to add designated items/experiences to their portfolio over the remaining three years. A number of these ongoing assignments will foster a more integrated business perspective. A completed portfolio will be included in the request for graduation.

The existing pre-business structural core will remain in tact with a voluntary integration revision being asked of all faculty members teaching these courses. This revision will be supported with a center having updated integrated instructional resources, private sector speakers bureau, workshop experiences, and new insights emanating from the experiences of the multi-discipline BADM 101 teams.

A proposal has been made that an enhanced capstone experience be integrated into the Business Policy and Strategy Course (perhaps renamed *Strategic Planning*). An additional revision might be that this capstone experience be provided at the end of the students' junior year and an additional three credit hour course would be added that will "house" an *extreme* business simulation activity that will once again reinforce integration and build upon the freshman EWL experience.

As the student focus builds, a required exit exam of all business school students would be added to the program with a passing score required for graduation. Students would pass either the ETS exam or a Business School designed exit exam before the degree is conferred.

Graduate students could be integrated into the SIFE business experience as consultants, problem solvers, or upper management personnel. This would be a "natural" progression as some of our graduate students will eventually have experience in the complete proposed integration effort.

Faculty evaluations by BADM 101 students seem on average lower than in other courses. Given that students perceive increased skill levels and express satisfaction with the course, this seems inconsistent and further research in this area is indicated.

### Anticipated Outcomes

Several outcomes are anticipated as a result of this real business/education partnership. These outcomes include:

- Improved retention rates.
- Improved matriculation rates to the Business School programs.
- Elevated student success possibilities.
- Placement of students into a career exploration mode early.
- Improved competencies and skills of graduates upon entering the workforce.
- Students' increased understanding of the integration of business disciplines.
- Creation of a model for first year success courses.
- Creation of a University culture that places higher quality and quantity resources earlier in a student's experience.

### Reflections

In our situation, many things of substance were gained from re-engineering our curriculum using a student (learner) centered model:

- Acceptance of the professor as a coach rather than a fountain of knowledge

- Realization that quality instructional effort is a team effort and requires additional
- resources
- Importance of both formative and summative evaluation using various evaluation models
- Demonstration that instructional practices and decisions are very important and work in this area creates fertile ground for research.

This experience suggests that reworking curriculum by reflecting on what researchers, the business community, students, and faculty have to contribute pays huge dividends. Often the benefits go far beyond the creation of a revised course. The outcomes can, in fact, be a new and more productive culture for all.

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