

Infusion of Liberal Learning Into the Business Curriculum

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Abstract: Saint Elizabeth University (SEU) is a private, Catholic liberal arts college in Morris County, N.J. The University serves a diverse range of students but has a strong tradition of concern for the poor, for developing leadership in a spirit of service and social responsibility, and a commitment to the promotion of women as full partners in society. As such, the University and the Business program continually seeks ways to engage our students in learning that best prepares them for academic and professional success. The impetus for this initiative was the receipt of a Yes We Must Coalition grant from the Teagle Foundation to address the extra challenges of career-ready education at colleges serving low-income students. Saint Elizabeth University, formerly, the College of Saint Elizabeth, is part of the Yes We Must Coalition (YWMC); The Yes We Must Coalition strives to increase degree attainment of low-income students by promoting the work of small, independent, not-for-profit colleges and universities and others committed to this purpose. The primary focus of our work was to infuse liberal learning into the business curriculum, specifically Analytical Thinking, Multiple Framing, The Reflective Exploration of Meaning, Practical Reasoning, and Ethics. Liberal arts learning helps students develop essential skills that will help them analyze information, identify trends, communicate effectively, and encourage imagination in the workplace. The mission of Saint Elizabeth University supports this endeavor as well as we seek to be a community of learning in the Catholic liberal arts tradition for students of diverse ages, backgrounds, and cultures.

Key words: liberal learning, analytical thinking, multiple framing, reflective exploration of meaning, practical reasoning, ethical reasoning

JEL code: A2

1. Introduction

Saint Elizabeth University is a private, Catholic Liberal Arts University in Morris County, N.J. The University serves a diverse range of students but has a strong tradition of concern for the poor, for developing leadership in a spirit of service and social responsibility, and a commitment to the promotion of women as full partners in society. As such, the University and the Business program continually seeks ways to engage our students in learning that best prepares them for academic and professional success. The impetus for this initiative was the receipt of a Yes We Must Coalition grant from the Teagle Foundation to address the extra challenges of career-ready education at colleges serving low-income students. The primary focus of our work was to infuse

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liberal learning into the business curriculum, specifically Analytical Thinking, Multiple Framing, The Reflective Exploration of Meaning, Practical Reasoning, and Ethics. Liberal arts learning helps students develop essential skills that will help them analyze information, identify trends, communicate effectively and encourage imagination in the workplace. The mission of the University supports this endeavor as we seek to be a community of learning in the Catholic liberal arts tradition for students of diverse ages, backgrounds, and cultures.

The purpose of this initiative was to revise select assignments in select courses in the undergraduate business program to intentionally infuse liberal arts learning opportunities into the curriculum. This is important work noted by educators for years; Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard University, noted in 1890 that the objective of a good education for business people would require development of “accuracy in observation, quickness and certainty in seizing upon the main points of a new subject, and discrimination in separating the trivial from the important in great masses of facts”, and that “liberal education develops a sense of right, duty and honor” (Reed, 1923). However, the competencies most associated with liberal learning have not traditionally been incorporated in business program learning outcomes. Further, business courses have not generally incorporated pedagogies, learning activities, and assessments intentionally directed toward helping students develop these competencies. With the help of an implementation grant we set out to make changes to five courses in the undergraduate business program. We convened a group of ten faculty from across the institution and created a plan to utilize the interdisciplinary relationships between faculty to inform undergraduate business teaching and learning, specifically curriculum development, pedagogy, faculty development, and resource sharing for student liberal arts learning. We entered the process believing that enhancing the learning experiences of our business students through the purposeful incorporation of liberal learning experiences will improve their ability to think critically, to learn broadly, to reflect, and to be self-aware global citizens.

After identifying faculty to work with us in this initiative, we determined that we needed to understand what faculty (including adjunct instructors) teaching in the business program understood about liberal learning outcomes in the business curriculum. We utilized an electronic survey to gather the information. The survey results indicated that the faculty believes that the curriculum does lead to the achievement of its liberal learning outcomes; however, there is room for a more intentional focus on the assignments and pedagogies used to meet these broad liberal learning outcomes. The survey results indicate the need for the revision of several of the courses throughout the curriculum from introductory level courses through the capstone. Importantly, the survey did not account for developmental learning as the students move through the curriculum. For example, a basic level of analytical thinking should be measured in a 100 level course, but a deeper level of analytical thinking and application should be measured in the 300 and 400 level coursework.

Specifically, the survey revealed that outcomes related to multiple framing and reflective exploration of meaning are not adequately supported in the curriculum. Multiple framing was reported as an outcome in only 60% of the courses and unanimously identified in the survey in only 13% of the courses. Similarly, the reflective exploration of meaning was supported as an outcome in 73% of the curriculum, and unanimously identified as an outcome in 26% of the curriculum. This finding was supported in a follow-up question in the survey in which 43% of the respondents noted that multiple framing is not supported in the curriculum, and 30% reported that the reflective exploration of meaning is not supported. It is important to note that respondents agreed that analytical thinking and practical reasoning are supported in the curriculum at 70% for each type of outcome, with 30% strongly agreeing. A small percentage of the respondents strongly disagreed that the program meets the oral and writing communication outcomes and disagreed that it meets the critical and creative problem solving, utilization

of technology, and understanding of global influences outcomes. These responses suggest that there is room for improvement in meeting these outcomes in the curriculum.

With regard to particular types of assignments and course materials that are used to support the learning outcomes in the program, the text, lecture, guest speakers, case studies, videos, reflection, problems, and class discussions were noted as current learning tools. These responses suggest that outcomes might be better met through a further infusion of liberal arts content and pedagogy.

The survey concluded with an open-ended response option. One respondent felt that there has been a noticeable decline in writing skills among the students in the program in the courses the instructor taught. We acknowledge that writing is not an explicit liberal learning outcome; however, the survey supports more opportunities to infuse writing assignments into the curriculum.

As an additional check on the liberal arts experiences of our business students, we examined the transcripts of business graduates of the last five years (2013-2018). Almost 70% of those students took at least one liberal arts class beyond what was required for General Education or recommended for their major (Ethics in Business). Although that figure looks promising, the great majority of those graduates took only one of those “extra” classes. Moreover, each of those extra classes was an entity unto itself, making no reference to the application of its content or methodologies to topics in business. Experience has shown repeatedly that students need guidance and practice if they are to integrate their learning in disparate disciplines both before and after they have earned their degrees.

The work to revise the five identified courses began Summer 18 and concluded Spring 21. To date the courses that have been revised and their descriptions are as follows:

- **BUS100 — Introduction to Business: Domestic & Global Dimensions**
The Introduction to Business course provides a fundamental working knowledge of the varied aspects of business and prepares students for future studies in more specialized topics within the subject area. Students will increase their awareness of the overall environment and function of business as well as observe its contributions to society. This course also covers communication, technology, globalization, and business ethics.
- **BUS200 — Principles of Management & Management Skills**
This course is an introduction to the principles of management including planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. The course combines the traditional management process approach with contemporary systems and behavioral approaches. Awareness of the major skill areas of effective management to include communication, motivation, and innovation are addressed.
- **BUS215 — Principles of Marketing & Consumer Behavior**
Principles of Marketing and Consumer Behavior introduces the basic concepts and tools of modern marketing practice and appreciate the importance of marketing decisions dealing with product, price, distribution and promotion. The course will emphasize the interplay between these marketing decisions and environmental forces (competitive, economic, technological, socio-cultural, and legal-regulatory). The course will also provide the student with an understanding of consumer behavior, market research, market segmentation and positioning.
- **BUS350 — Small Business Planning & Management**
This course emphasizes the fundamentals of starting a new business venture from development to

planning, market analysis, initial financing, organizing, and managing. Topics include form of ownership, location, distribution channel and supply chain to cash flow, operations and marketing. Introduction to the nonprofit sector and community is presented. Management issues specific to nonprofits including mission, volunteerism and financial management will be explored. The principle of wealth creation and contribution to society will be dominant throughout.

- **BUS490 — Senior Capstone Seminar**

This capstone experience assesses the students' mastery of the Business Administration curriculum and the core competencies expected of all business professionals. Through class meetings and individual or team dialog, students will craft individualized projects that will allow them to analyze the complex multidimensional business problems.

The grant began during the summer of 2018, where Saint Elizabeth University, with two partner institutions, were funded through a Yes We Must Coalition/Teagle Foundation grant opportunity to ensure Analytical Thinking, Multiple Framing, The Reflective Exploration of Meaning, Practical Reasoning, and Ethics were explicitly taught in our undergraduate business curriculum. Each school approached the opportunity differently. Saint Elizabeth University determined that the best way to meet the goals of the grant was to choose five courses in the program and work with a group of liberal arts faculty across the institution to re-write or edit assignments in those courses to infuse liberal learning outcomes in assignments in a purposeful way.

2. Literature Review

According to DS (2018), "Put simply, business majors seem to be graduating with some of the technical skills they'll need to secure jobs, but without having made the gains in writing or critical-thinking skills they'll require to succeed over the course of their careers, or to adapt as their technical skills become outdated and the nature of the opportunities they have shifts over time" (para. 7). The student characteristics we are seeking to develop are also supported by employers for what Gardner and Estry (n.d.) call T-Shaped Professionals. T-Shaped Professionals "integrates depth, defined in terms of disciplinary knowledge and the ability to understand how individuals with that knowledge function and interact to accomplish a desired outcome within or across a system(s), and breadth, defined as the professional abilities that allow someone with profound disciplinary knowledge to interact meaningfully with others who possess different disciplinary knowledge in order to affect an outcome that might not otherwise be possible" (p. 2). Liberal arts learning helps students develop essential skills that will help them analyze information, identify trends, communicate effectively and encourage imagination in the workplace. Developing the highly sought-after T-Shaped Professional requires adjustments to curriculums and assignments including "innovative and intentional use of technology, space, and context to design learning experiences that can be integrated to chronicle a learner's development into a T" (p. 2). The new learning experiences designed to support and obtain the learning outcomes of the undergraduate business course contribute to the development of the student into T-Shaped Professionals.

According to Chew and McInnis-Bowers (2004), "the benefits of constructing programs of study that effectively prepare the liberally educated business professional have been well recognized and discussed for over a century. The skills developed through liberal arts learning develop communication and values in students, both essential to successful careers in business, helping them to be adaptable and agile in a rapidly changing environment. According to DS (2018), "Put simply, business majors seem to be graduating with some of the

technical skills they'll need to secure jobs, but without having made the gains in writing or critical-thinking skills they'll require to succeed over the course of their careers, or to adapt as their technical skills become outdated and the nature of the opportunities they have shifts over time" (para. 7).

Selecting a major and a career path are significant decisions in the academic life of an undergraduate. Changing majors during the university experience can impact retention because students might give up or determine that the new degree path is too lengthy and adds cost. When ensuring that students engage in careful degree decision making and support, especially early in their academic experience, persistence is positively impacted (Lowis & Castley, 2008). Thus, it makes sense to help students explore and advise them about choosing wisely in a way that reduces the number of switches that cost them additional time and money. To help with major and career decision-making, we employed Focus®2, an online, interactive, self-guided career, major and education planning system (Focus2career.com) in the Business 100 class, which is taken during the first or second semester upon entry into the University. Not all students in the course are intended business majors, but it is a required course for students considering a degree in business or a degree in our School of Professional Studies.

Another vitally important characteristic we sought to build in our students through this initiative is academic self-efficacy. This is important because academic self-efficacy affects overall academic achievement and academic outcomes (Alegre, 2014; Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Lowinger et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018) and functions as a critical predictor for students' success. Students who exhibited a higher level of academic self-efficacy generally achieved better academic performance and were more satisfied with their chosen major and intended career (Harder, Czyzewski, & Sherwood, 2015) which ultimately can help with retention and graduation rates.

The path to the labor market is particularly important for Saint Elizabeth University, formerly the College of Saint Elizabeth, as we serve a proportion of underprepared students. According to a New York Times report (2017) the University serves some of the poorest students among select private institutions and the North Eastern Athletic Conference; approximately 12% of the students report family incomes of less than \$20,000 annually. However, the University is among the highest performers in moving graduates up two or more income quintiles in the NEAC, in New Jersey, and among our peer institutions making the College 57th out of 578 selective private colleges; and, the College is 238th out of 578 selective private colleges that move poor students to rich adults (NYT, 2017). With regard to economic benefits, Gillie and Isenhour (2003) noted higher incomes for students who engaged in informed and considered career decisions as well as lower rates and shorter periods of unemployment, lower costs to employers associated with employee turnover, lower health care costs, lower incarceration and criminal justice costs, and increased worker productivity (p. 1). The value added to educational, social, and economic outcomes benefit the student, the institution, and society.

3. Discussion

The grant team: Director of Undergraduate Business/Assistant Professor of Business, Dean of Professional Studies, Professor of English, Associate Professor of Psychology, and Chair/Associate Professor of Business identified five courses in our undergraduate business curriculum, which were reviewed for explicit content with regard to liberal arts learning. The grant team recruited five additional faculty members: Professor of English, Assistant Professor of Global Studies, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Director of the Learning Center, and the Chairperson of Art, Dance, and Music. The team met regularly over two academic years to create and

re-write assignments that explicitly addressed liberal learning.

The Undergraduate Business Program requires a minimum of 13 courses. The five courses that were chosen for this effort include four required courses, BUS100 - Introduction to Business: Domestic & Global Dimensions, BUS200 — Principles of Management & Management Skills, BUS215 — Principles of Marketing & Consumer Behavior, and BUS490 — Senior Capstone Seminar and one elective that is taken by most of the graduates BUS350 — Small Business Planning & Management. These courses span the curriculum so, in addition to adding liberal learning assignments, we scaffolded the learning associated with the assignments.

4. Results

The results of this effort are two-fold. Firstly, the interdisciplinary work and faculty involvement has helped to create a stronger sense of collegiality and impetus for the faculty to work together in new and different ways. There is a renewed sense of community and interest in building more intentional cross-curriculum courses.

Secondly, since implementing the Focus® 2 assignment in the Business 100 course, we have noted an increase in the number of students who choose business as their major during the second semester of their sophomore year of study. While we are still gathering data for our analysis, our data to date is showing that since the administration of the BUS100 course from 2018 and forward, approximately 45% of the students are declared Business/Sport Management or Allied Health majors, (Allied Health is together with Business and Sport Management rooted in Business core). To increase persistence in the degree additional assignments were added to select courses. These courses were offered for the first time during the 2018 fall semester and end of course evaluations indicate that they positively impacted student persistence in the major. For example, the students' final presentation in the course is focused on their career project. Through the project and course evaluations, many students indicated their interest in both a business major and/or minor, particularly when this was not their first intended choice. Our intention is to revisit this data as the students complete their final capstone course during their senior year.

The various new assignments throughout our Management, Marketing and Small Business Management courses include collaborating with our Art Gallery faculty and students, using poetry and or other literature to teach business concepts, and engaging the students in various intentional reflections throughout the curriculum and utilize a tested measure of career and education decision making in the first semester business course by requiring entering business students to complete the Focus® 2 Career Assessments to assess their knowledge, skills, abilities, values and personality, and match them to current career information from the U.S. Department of Labor to determine if the coordinated multi-prong approach detailed above to student career decision making development in introductory business education will help move students forward with confidence in the business academic and career path.

The assignments have shown a great depth of engagement by the students and allows for more thoughtful and internalized recognition of the concepts. The capstone assignments are currently being piloted and will bring together the student's entire academic experience as compared to their career goals and development alongside a business plan creation. We also intend to continue to explore self-efficacy among the students who engaged in the updated curriculum. Preliminary data suggest that the reflections have helped students better understand what they need to do in terms of academic performance to successfully complete the program and find employment. This is particularly important to SEU as the University was recognized by the 2022 U.S. News & World Report as the top

college in NJ with regard to Social Mobility, among schools in the Regional Universities — North category, for a second year in a row. We will continue to explore the role of the infusion of liberal learning in the business curriculum with regard to this recognition.

Utilizing the Focus® 2 experiential self-assessment modules and reflection assignment has positively impacted our students. We have noted that students' level of engagement in the coursework is increased and with emphasis on making the assignment beneficial to the individual student, the reflection papers convey the student's academic and career goals supported by their own assessment information.

Results indicate that students with upfront knowledge of a potential career choice has helped students refine not only a major choice, but also define career and occupational paths. Additionally, the infusion of assignments and discussions designed to engage students in thinking about liberal arts learning, specifically, Analytical Thinking, Multiple Framing, The Reflective Exploration of Meaning, Practical Reasoning, and Ethics, together with the Focus® 2 lead to a summarized list of best fit occupations. The culminating result from the Focus® 2 is a Portfolio with the students saved assessments, Career/Occupations, major choices, and an action plan to move forward. The final part of the project includes a written reflection as well as a presentation to the class on their career choice, research findings, including data from the DOL, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis regarding the career choice and their final observations. Overall, we have found that the students being informed and intimately involved with understanding, reflecting, and having deeper knowledge of their career options has helped move students forward with confidence in their business academic and career path. Additionally, the interdisciplinary work and faculty involvement has helped to create a stronger sense of collegiality and impetus for the faculty to work together in new and different ways. There is a renewed sense of community and interest in building more intentional cross-curriculum courses. And, though we are still gathering data for our analysis, our data to date is showing that since the administration of the BUS100 course from 2018 and forward, approximately 45% of the students are declared Business/Sport Management or Allied Health majors, (Allied Health is together with Business and Sport Management rooted in Business core). And, as noted previously, preliminary data suggest that the reflections have helped students better understand what they need to do in terms of academic performance to successfully complete the program and find employment. We will continue to explore the role of the infusion of liberal learning in the business curriculum with regard to being recognized by the 2022 U.S. News & World Report as the top college in NJ with regard to Social Mobility, among schools in the Regional Universities- North category, for a second year in a row. We will continue to explore the role of the infusion of liberal learning in the business curriculum with regard to this recognition.

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A better understanding of self and the confidence gained via the multi-modal approach to engagement in liberal arts learning will support business students through their program of study and help them develop into the T-Shaped professionals sought by employers. Moving forward we plan to utilize the Self-efficacy Formative

Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2018) which contains 13 items that are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: *not very like me* to 5: *very like me*), with higher scores indicating greater academic self-efficacy to better understand if this characteristic was built in our undergraduate business students and to what extent. Ensuring liberal learning outcomes are met helps to ensure we are developing and graduating ethical leaders who approach problem-solving and decision-making with business acumen as well as liberal learning outcomes.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge our colleagues at Saint Elizabeth University whose expertise and time added significantly to the success of the grant work and to our students who work hard to do their best in the University with the goal of becoming successful business professionals.

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