

# **AN INTEGRATED PLAN FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN BUSINESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Experiential Education has been promoted as a means to enhance and improve the education of undergraduate and graduate business students. This paper presents a plan for incorporating such educational experiences into a standard business curriculum. The plan is being implemented at a regional commuter campus of a state university. Faculty and student incentives for involvement, as well as issues specific to the commuter campus model, are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Indiana University South Bend is a regional campus of a state university in the United States. Our campus serves approximately 4,800 full-time equivalent students (FTEs) each semester, with a student head-count of over 7,500. The student body is almost entirely commuters. The School of Business is AACSB-accredited, and it has about 850 FTEs per semester. The School of Business and Economics has about 35 full-time faculty members.

Our student population has been changing in recent years. Forty-five years ago, when our campus was first established, the small student body nearly all fit the “nontraditional student” model. They were generally older students who had attempted college at least once before and dropped out (or “stepped out” for an extended period of time). Many of these nontraditional students entered their business education with significant experience in the business world, and they shared that experience in rewarding classroom interchanges.

Today, our student body has a significant percentage of students matriculating directly from their high school graduation. We have more full-time students, defined as those registering for twelve or more credit-hours per semester (about 65% of our students now fit into this category). Many of them must maintain their full-time student status to qualify for health insurance or financial aid.

The majority student we find studying business on our campus today has limited experience in the business world. Their ability to make connections between the concepts presented in our classrooms and the “real world” is not as rich as their “nontraditional” predecessors. Experiential Education has been promoted as a means to help such students make the educational connections between the classroom and the real world. Various activities, some conducted in the classroom, and some that require students to venture into the real world (in a mentored and controlled manner) help students develop better understanding through direct application of classroom concepts.

This paper presents a plan for integrating Experiential Education into the business programs on our regional campus. The plan’s intended goal is to offer as many students as many experiential education opportunities as we can during their undergraduate or graduate experience. Special issues present on our regional campus are described.

## EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

In recent years, undergraduate and graduate business programs have faced criticism for a lack of relevance [1]. The business academy has been accused of over-emphasizing scientific aspects of research to the detriment of education more applicable to daily business activity. Some are turning to Experiential Education as a means for re-balancing these two key aspects of business education [8].

Most have a general idea of what is meant by “learning from experience.” Many think of the phrase “learning by doing.” Some suggest [9] that experiential learning may not necessarily be the most effective means to learn *everything*. Some writers use the term “experiential learning” interchangeably with Experiential Education. But others are careful to differentiate the two. Experiential learning is what occurs when we reflect on what happens to us in a given situation. Experiential Education adds structure that encourages better learning by someone else in a guided learning environment.

## THE INTEGRATED PLAN

The integrated plan for our campus had to be sensitive to the needs and constraints of our typical business student, while at the same time achieving our goal: offer as many experiential opportunities to as many of our students as possible.

### Field Projects

A Field Project requires a team of students to undertake a specific activity in a local organization. The student team is mentored by a faculty member, and they have a primary contact (the Client) within the organization. The project work is expected to draw the student team off campus and into the organization’s environment for observation, data collection, and analysis.

Optimal Field Project opportunities are non-mission-critical needs within an organization. The project must have a scope that will allow the student team to most likely complete their work within our typical semester calendar. The Client must be available and accessible to the student team and the team’s faculty mentor. The best project opportunities are those that the organization understands must get done, that the organization can define clearly, but they simply do not have the resources (some combination of time, workforce, and expertise) to get it done in a timely manner.

Convincing students on our campus to consider participating on a Field Project can be difficult. As mentioned earlier, our students lead very busy lives, and the Field Project experience asks them to become still busier. Fortunately, our program is the recipient of a generous gift from a local organization. The gift requires that a majority of the proceeds be allocated to student scholarships related to experiential education. So we have means to provide incentives to our students. Most schools can only offer students course credit for participation in such a Field Project. Students accepted to participate on a Field Project team in our program are offered a tuition scholarship for three credit-hours of Independent Study. In other words, the students not only receive three credit-hours toward their degree, they earn the credit for free.

### Case Studies

The Field Project idea is hardly new. Many business schools have implemented such programs with organizations in their communities. However, they tend to reach only a fraction of the student body. Unless project participation is a school-wide requirement, only a percentage of the business students will

participate. If the benefits from a given project experience are to be maximized, there must be a vehicle for bringing the experience to a broader student audience.

Written case studies have been an accepted medium for business education for many years. They represent a compromise in terms of experiential education: written case studies cannot provide the rich non-verbal and anecdotal observations that students can collect by conducting project work in the field. We believe these limitations can be mitigated by preparing case studies based on our own, local Field Project experiences. Case studies about local organizations resonate with our students because they are familiar with the organization as well as the market in which the organization competes. Of course, written case studies are time-consuming to prepare. In our plan, the faculty mentor for a successful Field Project may apply for a summer grant to prepare a case study and instructor's note based on the project.

### **Case Competitions**

We will introduce the case studies into courses that are central to our undergraduate and graduate curricula. The capstone Policy course is a natural location for incorporating the case studies. Case studies cannot be considered for incorporation into the curriculum without careful deliberation by the faculty involved in teaching the specific courses. Our plan is to have student teams within each capstone Policy class (at both the undergraduate and graduate level) prepare a response to the case study. Faculty members will judge the work of his or her case teams. They will select a team from each class that will qualify for a campus-wide competition. Student teams involved in the competition will have time to more fully prepare their case responses. They will then present their work to a panel of judges chosen from the faculty and from the School's Advisory Board. The team chosen as best in the campus-wide competition will receive awards and the opportunity to present their work at the case study's subject organization.

### **Completing the Cycle**

Once the plan is established in our school, there are other ways that other activities can be introduced to enhance the Field Project – Case Study – Case Competition program. For instance, once the case study “pipeline” is underway, representatives from the case study subjects can be invited to attend classes on our campus. Courses that occur early in the business curricula would be an excellent situation for such class visits. We have an “Introduction to Business” course that many freshmen and sophomores study as they are deciding on their major. Students enrolled in the course would benefit greatly from opportunities to meet business leaders and learn about their daily activities and their careers. Plant tours might also be arranged for inclusion in this course.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has presented an integrated plan for incorporating experiential educational activities into a traditional business curriculum. The plan is being implemented on a regional commuter campus of a state university. The plan has been designed to provide incentives for participation to our particular student body and our faculty.

The plan is in the process of implementation. By the time that Western DSI convenes (March 2008), we will have many aspects of the plan underway, and we can discuss what we have learned from the implementation experience.

A complete copy of this paper, including the references, is available upon email request to the author.