

# **DEVELOPING BUSINESS FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE COURSE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

First Year Experience (FYE) programs are on the rise in higher education. The essential aims of such programs are to increase undergraduate retention and promote academic success of first-year students while developing them as lifelong learners. In this article we describe a college-wide curriculum design effort to develop a Business Freshman Experience course at Cal Poly Pomona. The article delineates the course development process and its outcomes. It also provides insights into the critical success factors of an interdisciplinary, cross-departmental curriculum development endeavor.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **First Year Experience Program at Cal Poly Pomona**

First Year Experience (FYE) programs in higher education are on the rise as colleges and universities strive to promote student success, improve retention rates, reduce achievement gaps, and increase 4 and 6-year graduation rates. A recent Gallup-Purdue study that examined the linkages between college and student life after graduation, found that students' college experiences have a notable impact on their subsequent engagement at work and overall well-being [2]. The FYE courses across the nation's array of higher education institutions are often the first courses in the curriculum aimed at enhancing the college experiences of first-year students and setting students on the path towards engaging and meaningful educational experiences while in college.

Cal Poly Pomona has a strong First Year Experience program. The program was implemented by various colleges under the auspices of the Office of Academic Programs whom sets the campus-wide guidelines for student outcomes and course assessment. Among the university's FYE outcomes are the development of the core personal, interpersonal, and academic skills as well as the demonstrated commitment to collegiate success, academic discipline, and society. The learning outcome assessment includes statistical data (e.g., retention/graduation rates, GPA, and the national student engagement surveys) as well as the qualitative/qualitative data collected from student interviews/surveys, and the embedded, course-specific assignments and exams.

While the First Year Experience program at Cal Poly Pomona has a long and vibrant history, until now, the College of Business Administration (CBA) did not have a First-Year Experience course in its curriculum. Over the years, the efforts to develop an FYE course for business students run into structural challenges as well as the lack of an interdisciplinary infrastructure and the buy-in from college constituents.

The FYE course is designed for incoming freshman and not community college transfer students. Most of our local community colleges have a type of FYE course such as Introduction to Business that fulfills the same GE category as a first-year course.

## **Need for a Business FYE Course in the College of Business Administration**

The College of Business Administration, with over 4,500 undergraduate students, is one of eight academic units at Cal Poly Pomona. CBA, the second largest college on campus, is comprised of six academic departments (Accounting, Computer Information Systems, Finance, Real Estate and Law, International Business and Marketing, Management and Human Resources, Technology and Operations Management) that offer eight specializations.

During the 2013-2014 academic year, the College formed an inter-departmental FYE committee to develop an interdisciplinary course for first-year business students. The committee members included one representative from each of the six departments, an academic advisor from the College of Business Administration Success Center, and the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs and Student Affairs, who served as an ex-officio member of the committee. The committee's charter was to collaborate on the development of an Expanded Course Outline (ECO) and a detailed course syllabus for an FYE course, to obtain an approval on the course proposal from the College Curriculum Committee, to obtain course consultations from other colleges, and to submit the course proposal for a review in the Academic Senate.

Several contextual factors contributed to the need to develop an FYE course in the business curriculum. The student assessment data, collected and analyzed as part of the AACSB assurance of learning (AOL) process, revealed that the 6-year graduation rate of business students (at 54.5%) was lower than the rate of some of the other colleges at the university. Furthermore, this graduation rate was below the 65.1% average rate for public four-year colleges in California [3]. The assessment data also revealed that the first-year persistence rates of CBA students as well as their SAT and English/Math placement test scores were slightly below the university averages. These assessment data, in conjunction with the structural elements of the business curriculum which precluded many freshmen from taking business courses until the end of their sophomore year, pointed to a dire need for a first-year experience course.

### **COURSE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

#### **Formation of the committee**

The curriculum development effort to design an interdisciplinary first-year experience course in the College of Business Administration commenced with the formation of a college-wide committee. It was important for the college to include representatives from all of the departments, so as to ensure full participation of the entire faculty, and to secure a course "buy-in" from all of the departments. The committee selected a faculty Chair who led the curriculum design effort throughout the project. The role of the Associate Dean, an ex-officio member of the FYE committee, was to provide an overall guidance to ensure that the project objectives were met within the agreed-upon timeline and to provide access to college resources and assessment information needed by the committee in their course development work. The course design project culminated in the development of an Expanded Course Outline (ECO) which was unanimously approved by the College of Business Administration Curriculum Committee. The course proposal was then forwarded to the General Education (GE) Committee of the Academic Senate for the final review and vote.

## **Project Plan**

In order to ensure the completion of the course development effort within a 20-week timeframe, the committee Chair, in collaboration with the Associate Dean, developed a detailed project plan. The plan consisted of due dates, deliverables, and milestones. The project commenced on February 3<sup>rd</sup> with the first meeting of the FYE committee and concluded on June 2<sup>nd</sup> with the College of Business Administration submitting the final course proposal to Academic Senate. The committee's work proceeded through the tasks of reviewing the university's guidelines for a FYE course, consulting with other colleges that have successfully implemented FYE courses in their curricula, and developing a detailed set of learning goals and objectives for the course.

The course development was an iterative, participatory effort in which the members of the committee worked in small groups on a subset of learning outcomes, and consulted frequently with their respective departments as they progressed through the course design endeavor. In the end, when the Expanded Course Outline was finalized by the committee, all faculty in the college had an opportunity to comment on the evolving course proposal, and that feedback was incorporated in the final version of the ECO. The next step in the process was to solicit a 30-day consultation with the Associate Deans from the other colleges on campus. Only one college commented on the ECO and it was positive.

## **Learning Outcomes and Course Content**

The focus of the course is in developing students as lifelong learners, who understand the impact of the business discipline on society. Students will examine behaviors and skills (including relationships and other social aspects) that will produce a successful outcome. Stress and other health-related factors are also discussed in the context of lifelong success.

The student outcomes to be developed by this course are broken down into five areas – Commitment to my collegiate success, Commitment to myself, Commitment to society, Commitment to learning, and Commitment to knowledge of my discipline.

### **Learning Outcome # 1 Commitment to my collegiate success**

Students will develop a sense of commitment and responsibility to their academic endeavors to achieve a growing understanding of and respect for themselves and their education. Topics included are academic skills, learning style self-assessments, college resources, faculty interaction, and campus engagement. The main goal of this section is for students to determine the most appropriate approach for academic success at college using numerous resources available on campus and becoming involved on campus.

### **Learning Outcome # 2 Commitment to myself**

Students will develop and practice positive attitudes and productive behaviors that will result in academic success as the precursor to lifelong success. As part of this, topics explored are self-confidence and self-esteem, wellness and stress management, time management, managing their personal life, financial awareness and responsibility, cyber wellness, digital persona, and university resources.

Cyber wellness and digital persona are differentiators to other FYE courses. Cyber wellness encourages students to become a positive online presence by creating meaningful and responsible relationships online. They will explore good personal cyber wellness practices and strategies. Students will explore their own online content and create their own online strategy to manage their online reputation. During the course, students will prepare an online portfolio of classwork products to share with prospective employers as they seek internships and those first career openings.

### **Learning Outcome # 3 Commitment to society**

Students will develop a sense of their place in a global environment and the mutual support they have with each other. They will gain an understanding of their chosen profession and their responsibility to society. Students will be able to demonstrate awareness of the ethical aspects of the business environment. The topics explored in this section are learning community development, team building, student collaboration, ethics and professional integrity, extra-curricular activities, and professional student organizations. They will develop relationships among peers and professionals to create or expand their learning opportunities. Students will learn the value of broadening their experience outside the classroom (e.g., taking part in internships, study abroad, national competitions, alumni networks, attendance of guest lectures by industry professionals, and service learning opportunities). These activities will foster a meaningful connection with the community.

### **Learning Outcome # 4 Commitment to learning**

Students will develop a commitment and responsibility for their own education and learning. They will develop informational literacy skills that will contribute to future growth in their interests, abilities, and goals. Students will develop critical reading, speaking, and reasoning skills using a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

### **Learning Outcome # 5 Commitment to knowledge of my discipline**

Students will commit to developing an in-depth understanding of the business world from an international, national, regional, and local perspective. Students will find their place in the professional world and explore their role as a member of the global community. Students will also develop an understanding of the impact of globalization and diversity on the business environment and the implications of current global issues.

### **University FYE Student Success Partners**

CBA faculty will be invited to participate in teaching the course. However, when discussing the content for the course, numerous faculty on the committee were concerned that they were not qualified to instruct on topics such as learning styles, wellness and stress management, cyber wellness, and other topics not typically encountered in their existing courses or area of expertise. Cal Poly Pomona has instituted a program called FYE Student Success Partners. The FYE Student Success Partners are considered Subject Matter Experts (SME) in those topics. Staff from the Office of Student Life, Career Center, Student Health, Associated Student Incorporated, University Housing, the Registrar's Office, and many others will conduct guest lectures on their area of expertise. As with any SME, the special in-depth knowledge provided will be timely and most importantly accurate thus ensuring a first-rate launching point of student academic success.

## **Critical Success Factors**

Several factors contributed to the successful development of a college-wide, interdisciplinary FYE course. The first factor was the inclusive nature of this curriculum design project. The FYE committee included not only representatives of each CBA department, but also a professional student advisor with extensive experience in working with first-year students. The inclusive, participatory nature of the committee structure ensured the two-way flow of information between the committee members and the respective departments, thus contributing to the buy-in from all faculty of the college.

The second factor was the passionate commitment of the committee members to the course design effort and their sincere desire to develop a course that would help first-year business students succeed in college. The commitment and passion exhibited by the committee members were instrumental in the design of a course customized to the unique needs and specific demographics of the college's first-year student population.

The third critical success factor was the commitment of the College's leadership team to facilitate the success of this college-wide curriculum design effort. The Dean of the college set the vision and the goals of the course development effort, while the Associate Dean helped facilitate the development of the project plan as well as the acquisition of the informational resources needed by the committee throughout the project.

Finally, the fourth factor contributing to the successful development of the FYE course was having a committee Chair with extensive project management experience and a participatory style of leadership.

## **SUMMARY**

First Year Experience courses are not only on the rise but have proven to be instrumental in the academic success of the college student. Even though Cal Poly Pomona has a strong FYE program, the College of Business Administration was the last college on campus to create a FYE class. Assessment data gathered on entering CBA students indicated that our students' SAT and English/Math placement scores were slightly lower than the university averages, strongly prompting the need for the development of a FYE course.

A college-wide committee was formed to be inclusive and ensure buy-in of CBA faculty. An aggressive project plan was instituted to create the FYE course ensuring that faculty committee members consulted with their departments during the course design process. The multi-dimensional aims of the course were to support the transition of the first-year students from high school to college, to set the students on a trajectory of positive college experience and engagement, and to improve the college's persistence and graduation rates. Discipline-specific faculty, along with University FYE Student Success Partners, will ensure that important, timely, useful, and accurate information is shared with students and is expected to improve our students' academic success.

## **REFERENCES**

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