

INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO BUSINESS USING AN INTEGRATED CASE STUDY AND BUSINESS PLAN PROJECT

Karen Collins, Lehigh University

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of an innovative, interactive learning approach in which students gain a perspective on business through the study of a dynamic organization, the preparation and formal presentation of a business plan, and learn-by-doing activities. It explains how student learning in the Introduction to Business course at Lehigh University is enhanced through a unique partnering relationship with Nike as well as strong involvement in the course by alums and members of the business community. Additionally, it explains how this framework for introducing students to business can be adopted by any institution, regardless of resource constraints. Also, it identifies ways in which the course benefits colleges of business. Finally, it provides an assessment model for the course.

Introduction

An overview of business principles at an early stage can excite students about business and spark their interest in future business courses. Additionally, an Introduction to Business course can help first-year students feel connected with the College of Business and improve student retention rates. It is important to offer Introduction to Business courses that are integrative, exciting, and challenging.

Goal-Based Learning

By studying a real company, students can be introduced to business in an exciting way. Through an in-depth study of a dynamic organization, students are not only introduced to the functional areas of business and how they fit together, they are also exposed to critical issues affecting the business world, such as ethics and social responsibility, globalization, technology, e-business, supply chain management, and cultural diversity.

Additionally, an Introduction to Business course can be structured to allow students to “learn by doing.” A particularly relevant approach to motivate students to learn business concepts is called, “goal-based scenarios” or “goal-based learning.” This approach, which was developed by Roger Schank at the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University, is the primary training approach used by Accenture, a recognized leader in the training and development of its employees. In describing the goal-based learning approach, Schank states, “ It is not enough to provide students with a learn-by-doing task if what they’re

doing is of no relevance to them...In addition to incorporating an interest, it is also important to give students something to work towards. People learn things when they need to know them. Providing students with the opportunity to achieve a goal they find interesting is a good way to make them need to know what we want to teach.”

When a course is structured as a goal-based scenario, the goal of the course should be one that the students will genuinely want to accomplish. An appropriate way to structure an Introduction to Business course as a goal-based scenario is to have students apply business principles learned through the study of a real organization to the preparation of a business plan for a fictitious company. The business plan, which is the main deliverable (or goal) for the course, would be prepared in teams. Through the preparation of a business plan students learn how the various functional areas of business fit together. This interactive approach to learning gives students an opportunity to “see the big picture” at the start of their business program. To motivate student teams to excel in the preparation and presentation of their business plans, industry representatives could judge the business plans and prizes could be awarded to the top teams.

Lehigh University’s Course

For the past ten years, I have been developing and coordinating an Introduction to Business course at Lehigh University which is taken each fall by approximately 300 first-year business students. The course was developed with assistance from Accenture through a Faculty Fellowship for Excellence in Teaching. I spent two summers at Accenture’s educational facilities in St. Charles, Illinois, learning how the firm trains its professionals using goal-based learning techniques.

Description of Course and Audience

The purpose of the course is to excite students about business. First-year students are provided with a perspective on business by studying a real company — Nike. Through the study of Nike, students are exposed to critical issues impacting the business world. Students use a case study of Nike that was written based on in-person interviews with a dozen Nike executives and updated through ongoing research. The course is offered in 12 sections of about 25 students each, and is brought to the students by an instructional team made up of college faculty as well business professionals.

Approximately 70 upper-class students, who serve as apprentice teachers for the course, guide the first-year students in their team-prepared course projects. In addition, the first-year students receive many opportunities to strengthen their written and oral communication skills. Also, students are provided with information about the various majors available in the College of Business and Economics as well as business career opportunities.

A variety of activities are incorporated into the course to get students excited about business. In addition to regular classes, where students engage in lively conversations with each other and their faculty member, students become excited about business by participating in a number of special events. On several occasions, executives from Nike come to Lehigh to make presentations and interact with the students in small groups. The presentations give the students first-hand knowledge about Nike’s history, its marketing efforts, and its future. Additionally, students participate in exciting in-class exercises. During one class, they take part in a team-building activity. In another, they attend a “Career Day” during which they

meet in small groups with visiting professionals who work in various business disciplines. Students have the chance to learn what these individuals do on the job, and to discuss career opportunities in the different business fields.

Students are introduced to the excitement and challenges of starting a business. Throughout the semester, they work in teams to prepare business plans for a fictitious company that is part of the athletic shoe, apparel, and equipment industry. First-year students are assisted in the preparation of these plans by their apprentice teachers. An important part of the business plan is the section describing the financing to be obtained by their company. Rather than just let the teams assume they can get financing, the students are engaged in a realistic effort of presenting their business ideas to real bankers and members of the college's Board of Advisors to secure financing. Shortly thereafter, the students present their business plans to their classmates. These presentations are videotaped. Professionals from Accenture judge the top 24 business plans and team presentations, and select the top three teams. Members of the three winning teams are honored at a daylong event in New York City. The day begins at the New York Stock Exchange where the students attend a luncheon and visit the floor of the exchange. They then enjoy a shopping spree funded by Nike gift certificates. That night they join professionals from Accenture for a celebration dinner.

The experience offered by the Introduction to Business course is unique and provides a fantastic opportunity for Lehigh's incoming first-year students to learn about the world of business in an exciting way. Additionally, the course allows first-year students to interact on a regular basis with upper-class students in the college. Much of the success of the course can be attributed to the partnering relationships we have with Nike, Accenture, members of our Board of Advisors, and about 75 business professionals who contribute their time to participate in the course and enrich the lives of our College of Business and Economics students.

Faculty Support

The support provided for the teaching team has enabled the course to be successful with various combinations of faculty and business professionals. This course is staffed with successful business professionals who are able to share their vast business experiences with the students. They do an amazing job connecting with the students. Some of these individuals commute more than two hours each way to be a part of the teaching team.

To provide a positive experience for both the students and faculty, substantial efforts are made to support those teaching in the course. This has been accomplished, in part, by providing each member of the teaching team with a faculty manual containing all student materials as well as detailed teaching notes for each class (that are linked to PowerPoint slides). The teaching notes describe the class, identify the key points to be covered, and list any special instructions needed for the class. They include extensive teaching notes used to guide in-class discussions as well as in-class exercises. Finally, they contain copies of Nike materials blended into the course, including case notes, memo writing assignments, and discussion questions for videos. Because of the availability of these teaching notes, individual faculty do not need to produce their own notes, and consistency in coverage among the various sections of the course is accomplished. Grading keys for exams and grading sheets for memos ensure consistency in evaluating exams and memo writing assignments. It is also important to mentor faculty, particularly during their first few years teaching in the program.

This is accomplished through regular “training sessions” and individual meetings with the faculty.

Assessment

The attached document identifies the major goals of the course and related objectives. It breaks the objectives down into educational components and indicates the evaluation mechanism used to assess each component. The assessment data collected each year through multiple sources are used to make changes to the course. The faculty team meets each spring to analyze feedback data collected from students, apprentice teachers, and business professionals. The team members discuss the course, assess what went well and what could have gone better and identify suggestions for improvement. These suggestions for improvements are used to re-design the course for the next year. Student satisfaction data collected from students enrolled in the course has consistently shown that they believe they learn a lot from the course, enjoy the course, find the business plan beneficial, and would recommend the course to others. Surveys of students two years after taking the course indicated a positive long-term carryover effect based on experiences gained in the course. Another measure of success is that about 80% of those students eligible for the apprentice teacher program apply to rejoin the course in their junior or senior years as a coach to one of the teams.

Adoption at Other Schools

The approach to introducing students to business can be adopted by any institution regardless of resource constraints. For example, LaSalle University adapted this approach and offers the course through a partnering relationship with Johnson & Johnson, one of its key employers. Northeastern University adapted the approach to study the retail company, TJX, which is headed by the chair of its advisory board. Each of these courses is unique, but focuses on the same two key elements: learning about business through the study of a real company and applying what has been learned to the preparation of a team-prepared business plan.

To further disseminate the course materials, I joined with Prentice-Hall to create an Introduction to Business text -- *Exploring Business* -- which was released in January 2007. Students receive both a printed textbook and access to an online web site that contains everything that is in the printed book plus additional materials that include 26 case notes, memo assignments and videos about the companies being studied. While the printed textbook is static, the active, online component of the text is dynamic with interactive figures, exercises, and concept checks. The company materials are updated each semester so students learn what is happening at the company now, not what happened a few years ago. Faculty using the book will have a choice of companies to use to introduce students to business. The first company featured in book is Nike; the second will likely be Starbucks. Alternatively, faculty can select their own company to study. For example, a school might want to study a local company or a company that is connected with their school through alumni connections or campus recruiting. When this option of studying a related company is chosen, faculty will be offered assistance in developing case notes for their company.

How the Course Benefits Colleges of Business

This course provides several benefits to colleges of business. It helps prepare students for future courses by introducing them to the various areas of business and providing them with opportunities to learn to work effectively in teams. It strengthens students' written and oral communication skills as well as computer skills. It engages them in self-learning, and exposes them to various majors and career options in business. It introduces them to the college and sets work expectations for business majors. It increases retention of business majors. It connects first-year students with upper-class students through the apprentice teacher program and allows these juniors and seniors to start "giving back" while still students in the college.

The course also provides unique partnering opportunities for business colleges. It provides a way for Colleges of Business to partner with a company of interest. By providing an opportunity for alums and business professionals to interact with students, it strengthens support from alums and builds positive relationships with the business community. An innovative, integrative, and exciting Introduction to Business course is also a strong selling point to students and parents as they consider what institution to attend.

