

We Believe in “Hire” Education: Establishing an Experiential Professional Pathway Program

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ABSTRACT

There is a difference between being properly prepared for professional life and being proactive in choosing a suitable professional pathway. Although business schools are capable of providing an excellent education, some, if not many students engage in the learning process without asking where it will lead them. This paper describes a systematic process to bridge the gap between college and professional life through a professional pathway program. In order to make such a program effective, students must be involved in the process of proactively assessing their future. Although experiential learning is important throughout a student’s business education, supplementing an experiential professional pathway approach with robust future career reflection can play a critical role in setting the stage for the effective pursuit of a particular profession.

Keywords: Profession, career strategy, experiential learning, curriculum, course design, online programs

BACKGROUND

In conversations with senior business majors about to graduate, both faculty and business school administrators discovered that an unspecified number of students did not have a post-graduation plan. Further investigation revealed at least three relevant concerns. First, some graduating students had no particular future profession or even industry in mind. Second, the school of business had no systematic process in place to engage students in a consequential conversation about their future. In turn, there was no process to ensure students were pursuing the curriculum best suited to their future, regardless of whether they had a plan established years before graduation. Finally, there was no way to differentiate students with a plan from those who needed the assistance of a deliberate and proactive professional pathway process. The subject university is not an exception. It has become essential to develop student skills in both disciplinary areas and career planning (Bear, 2016; Bridgstock, 2005; King, 2004). The focus of this effort is on career planning.

In response to the identified concerns, the school of business sought to establish a program to achieve the following objectives.

1. Ensure that every business student is engaged in a career planning process either before completing their sophomore year or, in the case of transfer or change of major students, upon arrival and enrollment in the business school.
2. Lead students toward the particular profession of their choosing.
3. Engage each student with a representative from their prospective position.
4. Systematically assess progress along a career pathway and success in attaining a particular position that was pursued.
5. Provide a robust source of information for career decision making.
6. Provide the option to learn about functional areas in business before making a career pathway decision.

CHALLENGES

Because of limited resources the addition of any new program poses challenges for a small to medium size business school. This challenge is magnified when the goal is to reach each of the enrolled students. In the current case, 650 students had to be serviced by 16 faculty and four staff members. With a ratio of 32 to one, accompanied by 4/4 faculty teaching loads, a highly engaged mentor/career advising process is not feasible. It is also the case that 16 faculty would not have the diversity of career advice needed by the potential options open to 650 students. With the appropriate process, students can be administratively tracked as individuals, but they must be addressed en masse to achieve accurate and adequate dissemination of career information.

CAREER INFORMATION

As previously stated, the career possibilities for 650 students cannot be addressed by 20 full-time faculty and staff. In fact, career pathways are nearly unlimited, so even a very large staff at a very large university would be challenged to provide accurate and adequate information on all the possibilities for their students. The initial discussion of our approach was to systematize the process according to industries, organizations, and people within particular organizations in order to create a funnel-like method leading students toward a particular target. But even this tactic would not provide the particulars of a viable industry or organization of interest. Further, having the students choose a particular industry without considering their personal passions, talents, or skill set is problematic and could result in a trial-and-error process for at least some students. With 650 students there would be no way to ensure that the process was not simply random or capricious decision-making by the student.

The University Career Center is also an option to consider; however, as well as having an even larger student-to-staff ratio, the adequacy and accuracy of the information available is even further removed from the business school's perspective on career pathways in business. Optimally, the business school could require a Business 101 course to be taken by every business major. The feasibility of this option depends upon business faculty staffing and curriculum flexibility. At least in the near term, the number of faculty in this case would not allow the capacity to provide a course to all 650 students. An even greater challenge is getting university-wide approval to add another required course to the curriculum.

A further complicating factor is students who enter the business program at different times during their academic careers. At least some of students come into the program with significant employment experience, if not very well established experience in a particular career path. If Business 101 enrollment is mandatory and the curriculum is too heavily focused upon the career pathway discussion, students with career-relevant employment experience will not benefit. Furthermore, if a transfer student has completed some core business courses elsewhere, a Business 101 course that is focused upon the fundamentals of business will be repetitive and unnecessary. Finally, the business school faculty will want to ensure a degree of rigor in any Business 101 course to avoid simply providing a career counseling experience. In short, as a supplement to a professional pathways program, a Business 101 course must strike an appropriate balance of fundamental business concepts and career counseling in the context of those concepts.

Business faculty members searched for alternatives in order to address the following challenges: (a) limited resources, (b) the unlikely possibility of adding adequate career-counseling information on our own, and (c) the near-term improbability of a mandatory Business 101 course. While engaging Bloomberg representatives at multiple conferences, business faculty discovered that Bloomberg was in the process of developing a career readiness course. The Bloomberg approach provided an attractive alternative to limited, if not non-existent in-house resources. It can be completed by students online with no curriculum development investment by the school of business. Bloomberg also projects providing assessment data. The program includes four modules, and the current cost is \$99 per module.

The finalized title for Bloomberg's initiative is *Exploring Your Potential* (EYP), which has become a joint effort by the University of Central Florida, Your Success Now, Bloomberg Businessweek and Peregrine Academic Services (see: <http://eyp.ysn.com>). It is oriented toward helping the student determine which professional path to choose, how that path represents what the student really likes to do, and what is necessary to pursue and achieve the culmination of that pathway. The program is advertised as a career planning experience. Students watch videos, view presentations, and engage in exercises. The process is designed to clarify ambiguity regarding one's career future. Some of the EYP program is based upon the book *Secrets of the Young and Successful* by Jennifer Kushhell and Scott M. Kaufman (2003). Their book received critical acclaim as a *New York Times* bestseller.

EYP is comprised of four courses. In course one, students learn to discover the options they have. They consider their skills and experience, and the things they like to do in order to determine what they can achieve. The second course focuses upon student talents to uncover as many career opportunities as possible. The third effort is about marketing oneself to prospective employers. The final course promotes plan execution.

As stated on the EYP website (see: <http://exploringyourpotential.com>), the learning outcomes of EYP are as follow:

1. Develop a clear sense of self and career orientation.
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2. Acquire the necessary skills to explore, investigate, and take action personally and professionally.
3. Take definitive steps and actions to construct strategic packaging and personal branding to leverage the student's experiences and abilities while maximizing career opportunities.
4. Design practical steps and actions to achieve career goals.
5. Increase personal and professional expectations to exceed career potential.

EYP can stand alone or be used in a business class. Business 101 can leverage the EYP experience. The curriculum is flexible, yet systematically comprised of four one-credit courses. Students can complete all of the components in a one-term intensive process or across various terms, to include distribution over the entire program of study. Finally, schools can supplement the process with additional activities aligned with their particular academic program objectives. For example, in this case the school of business accounting club is an essential activity for those pursuing careers in accounting.

ADMINISTRATIVE TRACKING

While the EYP achieves the objective of providing a robust source of information for career decision making, accounting for every business student requires appropriate administration. The system must also periodically assess the student's degree of progress, as well as the success in attaining a particular position.

The professional advising staff recommended that advising folders be used as the best way to maintain student records of career pathway progression. The folder accompanies each student to their advising appointment, so any career progression documentation can be made during advising. Despite the efficiency of this process, it is important that the career pathway discussion be able to be completed during the advisor's available time. Students are expected to have reflected upon their career pathway considerations as the result of their EYP progress. Thus, the role of the advisor is to ensure that students declare their choices in writing before leaving their curriculum advising session. Of course, the students are told that their decision is flexible and they are not committed to that course of action should they decide to change it. A member of the professional advising staff developed the Professional Pathway Program (PPP) form illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Professional Pathway Program Form

Professional Pathway Program	
Name: _____	
Objective: To establish a career direction.	
Process: In coordination with their academic advisor, students will designate a career pathway by systematically narrowing their focus toward a particular professional position.	
List one (or more) industry, organization, or contact options according to class-year. Choices can be made in advance of class-year. Changes can be made anytime.	
Sophomore Year: An industry(s) I would like to work in is . . . (see industry examples on the reverse)	
1 _____	2 _____
3 _____	Initial/Date Student: _____ SOBA: _____
Junior Year: An organization(s) in the above industry I would like to work for is . . .	
1 _____	2 _____
3 _____	Initial/Date Student: _____ SOBA: _____
Senior Year: A person(s) I can speak with in the above organization who knows about the kind of position I would like to have is . . .	
1 _____	2 _____
3 _____	Initial/Date Student: _____ SOBA: _____
INDUSTRIES	
Examples of major industries listed in the <i>Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce Business Directory</i> . Also go to the Chamber website for links showing greater detail and particular organizations in each industry that reside in the Greater Aiken area: http://web.aikenchamber.net/search	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising & Media • Agriculture Fishing & Forestry • Arts, Culture & Entertainment • Automotive, Aviation & Marine • Business & Professional Services • Communications • Computers, IT & Technology • Employment & Staffing • Family, Community & Non-Profit • Finance & Insurance • Government & Education • Health Care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home & Garden • Industrial & Manufacturing • Lodging, Travel & Tourism • Personal Services & Care • Pets & Veterinary • Public Utilities & Environment • Real Estate & Construction • Religious Organizations • Restaurants, Food & Beverages • Shopping & Specialty Retail • Sports & Recreation
For an exhaustive list of U.S. industries see the Bureau of Labor Statistics North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) showing supersector, sector, and industry levels at: http://www.bls.gov/iag/	

The PPP form is designed to have the undecided student list one or more industries that they might like to work in during their career. Students are expected to make this decision at some point during their sophomore year, which ensures that they are advised into the relevant business concentration and taking the most relevant coursework. This is a critical juncture since the junior year which follows includes upper level courses in various areas of specialization. Based upon their academic progression to date, students will have a varying understanding of industry structures and classifications. This is one of the areas that can be covered in a Business 101 course, which would serve to supplement the PPP. But if Business 101 is optional, then the exposure to industry classifications schemes is not assured.

To address the issue of industry selection, the backside of the PPP form contains a list of industries (see Figure 1). The industries listed on this form are provided by the local Chamber of Commerce, which may or may not contain all of the relevant options for a university student. It was used in this case to illustrate most of the local options. Students are also directed to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in order to get a complete picture of the industrial classification scheme. In the event that a student is already committed to a particular industry, the advisor is encouraged to ask whether the student has considered a particular organization in that industry. So, the student need not wait until his or her junior year to identify an organization; however, before completing their junior year, students are expected to identify a particular organization.

Organization identification is a critical component of the PPP process. When students begin their senior year they will have a final advising appointment to plan for their last semester. During the last advising appointment, the advisor will discuss options for identifying a particular person in their organization of choice. The school of business will use its network of alumni and local business persons in order to help the student identify an appropriate person. Optimally, the point of contact should be someone holding the type of position that the student aspires to in beginning their career after graduation. The objective is to ensure the student learns how to pursue that position or one similar. The relationship between the student and the point of contact is not expected to be a time-consuming or involved mentoring process. It is simply a fact-finding connection to ensure that the student is taking the appropriate steps toward employment after graduation. Since the business school will process numerous graduating seniors, there is no screening to ensure a fit between the student and the contact person in the hope of developing a long-term relationship. If such a relationship developed to the benefit of the student, this would be a positive, but unintended outcome of the PPP. Initiating mentor-protégé relationships is beyond the scope of the PPP.

Various means can be used to ensure that the PPP forms are being completed. The professional staff in charge of advising can ensure the form is complete when it is returned after the advising appointment. Faculty members are asked to notify the Dean or other relevant administrators when a student needs help identifying a point of contact in their organization of interest. The school of business will assume responsibility for providing a name and contact information. Prior to graduation the advising staff will contact graduating seniors to determine if they have obtained a position. They will also determine if the position was one that the student had identified through the PPP. Regardless of whether a student has attained a position, staff members request and record updated contact information relevant to the student's post-graduation status. The employment attainment data is used to assess the effectiveness of the PPP.

BUSINESS 101 AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE PPP

In order to establish one curricular element of the career planning process, a business faculty member developed and taught the school's first Business 101 course. Unlike traditional Business 101 offerings, this course curriculum extended beyond a survey of fundamental business concepts. The course was created to do the following: (a) offer a general elective to give undecided students a survey of business, (b) retain declared business students who have not yet taken upper-level business courses, (c) teach basic communication skills, including etiquette that are necessary to succeed in the business school and beyond, (d) assess software skills and recommend developmental activities, as needed, (e) promote the requirements necessary for acceptance into the Business School Professional Program, and (f) formally introduce students to the PPP.

In addition to career planning, both Business 101 and the PPP should help improve retention rates in the school of business. While Business 101 serves to peak interest in the study of business, it is still an optional course. In contrast, the PPP will require all students to periodically and systematically assess their future in the context of business. The effort to be more deliberate in understanding where one is going will ensure that one's pathway is a

factor when making curriculum and course decisions. The relevance of one's curriculum to one's future should impact retention, as well as post-graduation success.

Business 101 enhances the PPP experience by giving students the context within which their professional pathway decisions are made. As discussed earlier, if a student does not know what an industry is or what the industrial classification scheme is about, then it will be difficult for him or her to understand the relevance of industry choice. Business 101 teaches the fundamentals and functional areas of business, so students learn about roles they can fill within business organizations. Without business 101, it could be more challenging for students to determine what they would do in an organization. While some of these choices might be obvious to those of us whose positions have been related to business for a long time, we must recall that the motivation behind offering the PPP is that some seniors stated they would not begin to look for work until after graduation. In addition, others indicated that they did not know where they would look for work.

The first offering of Business 101

In the following three sections the assigned faculty member recounts her experience in first-person with the school's inaugural offering Business 101. Thirty-one students enrolled in the course, which is a significant number for an elective in this context. Because this was the first offering of the course, there were no prerequisites and it was open to any student. The student population was diverse in gender, academic status, age, and employment status.

The course was divided into eight modules in order to coordinate diverse activities and topics into a cohesive framework. The topics of each module were:

1. Overview and Skill Building: Careers, Jobs, and Portfolios
2. Looking at the Business Environment
3. Skills Building: Presentations
4. Managing a business and Employees
5. Skills Building: Business Communications, Business Etiquette
6. Principles of Marketing, Accounting & Finance
7. Professional Pathways Presentations
8. Course Close Out

A business fundamentals course text (Solomon, Poatsy, & Martin, 2014) was used and supplemented with Karia's (2015) work on designing effective presentation slides. The course activities included exploring various career websites housed at the university Career Services Center web portal, reviewing the Bureau of Labor Statistics Career Outlook site, building a basic resume and cover letter, and exploring the ideas of personal branding and career portfolio building. In order to help students write the cover letter, they explored different job sites for positions in which students might be interested in making an application. Later, they wrote a mock-up letter to the job's hiring manager and then followed that up with discussing how to prepare for interviews and the role of a career portfolio during the interview process.

Another activity was exploring the Ted-Worthy presentation skills. Students discussed the book and built a five-minute presentation limited to one image and no, or very little text on the slide. The group presentations were delivered on "Speed Presentation Day" with the expectation that students would tell a story about any topic they chose in less than five minutes. The goal of the presentation activity was to help build student efficacy in using images as cues to reduce reading from slides.

The course covered business in general, as well as the particulars of management, marketing, finance, accounting, and information technology. The goal of the lessons was to entice toward, rather than deter students from various business topics. So, the lessons were designed to generate a positive and appealing experience in the classroom. For example, students engaged in group discussions about the requirements to establish a small business. They also discussed ethics and social responsibility, reviewed supply and demand, and created and discussed personal budgets so that students would link any college debt repayment requirements to their career aspirations.

Interesting moments and course outcomes

During the economics chapter, I used a chocolate demonstration to illustrate supply and demand. The presentation needed more polish, but in the end, when passing out the chocolate, an upper division student commented that he finally understood supply and demand. Another interesting comment concerned interview etiquette when a student

stated that he thought thank you notes were required only after being hired, as opposed to after any interview. The point where I was most concerned though, was when I discovered that graduating or near-graduating students remained unclear about their post-graduation goals. So, I am glad we covered some of the job search activities, but once again this revelation validated the need for a required PPP.

Students were asked to write four or five short module reflections. The goal was to elicit feedback during the course and not solely afterward, in the event that a course correction was needed. The reflections indicated that many of the topics were new and interesting to lower division students, while also being a good refresher for upper division students.

Future directions for Business 101

Future directions for discussion include expansion of the personal experiences of my involvement in the course and how those relate to the value of student engagement on teachers. There appears to be little or no literature about how students impact and influence teachers. Some faith-based or other servant leadership writings can shed light on the value of being of service to others in this context. Additionally, I would include and more closely examine student comments from the reflection papers.

In closing, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests that “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” This perspective can be a valuable guide to teaching because it reminds me that helping to make a difference in the lives of students is important. For me, I find that students keep me in touch with young values and ideas, forcing me to see the world through their younger lenses.

CONCLUSION

The professional pathway program can be viewed by some students as a relatively mundane process because they might not understand why they are doing it. It might also be viewed by faculty as unnecessary because the necessity of making career decisions should be obvious to students. Despite that, the evidence suggests that at least some students are on a path with no end in mind. Thus the PPP is an essential process.

The PPP can be implemented as described because it does not encroach significantly upon pre-existing curriculum, student schedules, or faculty workload. Since the EYP portion is a web-based process, nothing must be added to the current University curriculum. Students can work through the process at their own pace. Faculty are tasked only with confirming the completion of a form in the student’s advising file. If the faculty are willing and able to devote more time to the career considerations of a student, they can do so at their discretion.

The PPP can be administered with minimal resources to achieve the goal of ensuring every student is included. It also promotes a process to confirm the post-graduation employment status of each student. Finally, it assesses the effectiveness of the program according to student placement in a targeted profession.

If there is an ambiguous component of the process, it concerns in the role of Business 101; however, the introduction to business can serve to energize the PPP process. Studying the fundamentals of business will place the career pathway concept into its appropriate context. Students will be better able to make the connection between having particular skill sets and performing well in particular business functions. Students will be able to assess their skill sets and gravitate toward their strengths, as well as their desires in pursuing a particular profession. The foundation for that pursuit will be the appropriate business concentration and coursework aligning with their capabilities and future desires.

While the EYP will assist students greatly in assessing their potential as it relates to roles in the business world, Business 101 will enhance the PPP experience by providing some business knowledge context prior to starting upper-level coursework. Since much of the upper-level coursework is not completed until the senior year, this PPP process is essential. In some, if not many cases the senior year is too late to choose an appropriate career path relative to either preparation or preference. It is cliché to invoke the chicken and egg argument, but it aptly describes the nature of the problem. Only Business 101 offers a fundamental overview of business at a time when students need to begin making decisions about their future career. Ideally, all students would enroll in Business 101 and complete the PPP. In the absence of adequate resources, the PPP accompanied by EYP provides a sensible solution.

The faculty member concluded the discussion of her Business 101 experience by emphasizing the importance of making a difference in the lives of students. The general goal of any program, and in this case the PPP, is that it be consequential. The PPP is actually a very simple approach to address what should actually be a very simple problem. While it is obvious that a student should be pursuing education in the context of future life activities, that conclusion is not obvious to all students. As educators, we not only see the big picture view, but we also see it in hindsight. Young, inexperienced students with less education do not have that luxury. As AACSB accreditation standards promote engagement, innovation, and impact, it is incumbent upon educators to ensure that we are making a difference. Higher education in business has now transitioned from the simple imparting of knowledge to the application of that knowledge. Directing students through a professional pathway program aligns their talents, skills, and knowledge with a position where they can apply that talent, skill, and knowledge. It is no longer sufficient for us to provide higher education, we have reached the point where we must provide “hire” education.

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