

# RETAINING UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS: A NEW APPROACH TO THE CRUCIAL FIRST SEMESTER

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## Abstract

*The decline in undergraduate Business enrollments heightens the importance of retention efforts within the major beyond the typical campus wide concerns. A curricular approach in the first semester linking a traditional First-Year, "University 101" survival skills seminar to a traditional introductory survey Business course may positively influence the newcomers' decisions to persist in their major.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

While much attention has been given to retaining undergraduates by higher education administrators, reaction in the Business discipline has seemed, overall, less urgent. The principal author, a regular presenter at the annual meetings of The First Year Experience, has noted few Business colleagues attending these meetings much less presenting papers about the retention issues they face in their programs.

Just 13 years ago, 27% of all first-year students nationwide had expressed an interest in Business majors (Collison, 1992). As interest declined during the '90s into the low teens, two factors may have moderated the level of concern amongst Business educators: 1) a focus on their graduate Business program which may have had a compensating effect on total full time equivalent student enrollment; and 2) the continuing emphasis of the traditional AACSB undergraduate standards on the upperclass years where those students who had reached that hurdle typically showed a greater loyalty to continue in the program. A phenomenon of underclass majors who may have been "cherry-picked" away to other interesting majors in the first two years may have gone unnoticed by central administrators since these students still counted positively in campus overall retention statistics.

The purpose of this article is to describe a unique curriculum approach to improve retention within major being explored in the first semester at one undergraduate Business program on a Northeast campus. The popular response of a first year "college survival skills" seminar has been linked to a standard, three credit Introduction to Business course in an attempt to create an interest early on with their Business major and help them succeed in pursuing it.

## II. "UNIVERSITY 101"

The First Year Seminar in Business was structured as a true "student success" class modeled after the "University 101" approach championed by John Gardner at the University of South Carolina and now adopted on many other campuses nationwide. It was delivered to 156 new arrivals in the Ithaca College School of Business in Fall, 1999. A one credit, first-year business seminar class had been offered in previous years. The "Student Success" approach was successful for first-year students specifically because the class was different from a content driven course; it was very process and activity oriented.

The main focus of the class was to provide students an opportunity to get to know other newcomers in a supportive, non-threatening environment, where they were encouraged to be active and engaged, to both speak in class and to work in teams. The goals of the course were to help students:

- learn more about Ithaca College;
- develop teamwork skills;
- connect with other business students and with the Business School;
- learn more about themselves and others to enable them to become better students and better managers;

- successfully complete advance registration for their second semester; and
- learn or review student success strategies (effective studying, goal setting, etc.)

When asked in an evaluation questionnaire if the course should be offered again, over 95% responded affirmatively regardless of the professor teaching it. Typical written comments, reflecting the majority view, included remarks that the class was "helpful," "fun," "a good introduction to college," and, "it helped you establish a network of friends and learn about the school."

A substantial number of students, however, indicated an interest in transferring out of the School of Business, the majority to another major within the college. The students were using their required economics and math courses to judge their interest in Business. The one-credit, once-a-week, First Year Seminar in Business course, while successful as a student success course, did not contribute to retention within the Business School program. We hope to achieve the best of both worlds in Fall 2000 by linking the First Year Seminar course to "World of Business," a three-credit introduction to business course at Ithaca College that had been previously delivered in the second semester.

### **III. CONNECTING THE COURSE WORK**

The curriculum linkage between World of Business and Freshman Seminar will occur by adapting material used in the Freshman Seminar text (Downing, 1999). The book emphasizes critical thinking exercises and generic educational activities to improve academic skills such as reading, writing, note-taking, test-taking, memorizing and learning about college customs. The course linkage is accomplished by coordinating the timing of the syllabi so that the business subject matter at hand in the three-credit survey course, World of Business, can be used to embellish the critical thinking exercises in the one-credit seminar and that the generic educational activities discussed in the seminar can be applied to the traditional survey course. Opportunities abound.

The seminar's critical thinking assignment on interdependence will be discussed when the very same students in World of Business are studying the basics of production planning and operations management. The seminar's critical thinking assignment on procrastination will be used in a compare-and-contrast manner when the very same students in World of Business are studying the "just-in-time" technique during a discussion of inventory management. The seminar's critical thinking assignment on academic integrity issues will happen when the very same students in World of Business are studying business ethics. The seminar's critical thinking assignment on emotional maturity will dovetail the World of Business topic of recruitment as an element of human resource management. Whenever possible, the linked classes will explore the same important issues using real case studies in Business to further the critical thinking applications.

When the Freshman Seminar investigates the academic skill of note-taking via its text, notes taken in World of Business classes will become the application tool. Papers assigned in World of Business will become the seminar's fodder for skill building in writing. Reading skills will be developed using World of Business chapter assignments while seminar explorations of memorizing and test taking techniques will be timed for upcoming exams in World of Business.

### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Linking a survival skills First Year Seminar to an introductory survey course provide synergies that are not present when the courses are offered separately in different semesters. For the survey course, the Seminar takes on elements of a "break-out," discussion session -- one that is led by a colleague rather than a graduate student. This discussion section element of the Seminar then redounds to the benefit of instruction in the survey course, may improve student grades in the three-credit class and lead to an increased enthusiasm and confidence in their selected Business major. The linkage can also provide rich feedback opportunities to the survey course instructor regarding the effectiveness of the presentations being offered as garnered in the discussions undertaken in seminar.

Moreover, the strong disincentive for instructors in large survey courses to give written assignments because of the labor intensive grading demands of 170+ papers to be read is eliminated. Under the linked approach, the survey course papers are assigned in the smaller seminar sections and divided among those instructors who stand ready to grade the student submissions both on their substance and the criteria discussed in seminar about suitable

writing techniques. The students become better writers while learning more about an element of their newly chosen Business major.

The linkage also provides a synergistic effect to the Seminar. The connection to the unfolding survey course gives the “little” one-credit seminar more respect in the student’s assessment. The assignments in seminar seem more important. The survival skills taught there have immediate application to an important three-credit course in their major. Furthermore, through the linkage of the critical thinking drills to the substance of Business covered in the survey course the students see the application of the survival skills taught in seminar to the “real world” they are studying and eventually aspire to enter.

All of this, we believe, should contribute to the likelihood that students who begin their academic careers as Business majors will continue that commitment beyond their first semester.

## V. REFERENCES

- Collison, M. (1992). “*More Freshmen Say They Are Choosing Colleges Based on Costs,*” The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. XXXVIII, No; 20 (Jan 22), pp. 33,36.
- Downing, Skip. (1999). “*On Course - Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life,*” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.