

An Empirical Investigation of a 21st Century Career Development Program for Business Majors

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When a small, Midwestern business school launched a required, four-year career development curriculum, robust practicum courses, and a dynamic, co-curricular program, it proved itself to be in the vanguard of career development practices. Due to the extensive experiential learning this program provides, greater numbers of business and accounting majors are graduating with raised employment aspirations and the knowledge, skills, and confidence to begin their professional lives. Using quantitative measures, the results suggest the positive impact of these career development activities on students' certainty about career direction, assessment of the quality of their resumes and LinkedIn profiles, and confidence in interviewing.

Keywords: career development, career readiness, interviewing, professional identity

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has seen the transformation of labor markets and the social rearrangement of work as employment has adapted to an information economy. The far reaching effects of the global pandemic have further sped up this transformation. Recognizing these changes, a growing body of research points to a substantial gap between the knowledge, skills and abilities needed by today's employers and the capabilities of students emerging from our institutions of higher education. This gap existed even before the 21st century arrived (Watts, 1996, 1999); yet, increasing concern about the suitability of graduates' competencies and skills has become a prominent research area in business and management education literature (Arbaugh, Fornaciari, & Hwang, 2016; Arsata, 2016).

Literature Review

Part of the problem in closing the perceived gap between employers' expectations and students' capabilities has been the continuing debate about exactly which skills and abilities are required. A recent paper examining employers' job specifications found that many of the skills identified as necessary by academia, such as social responsibility, were not those in demand by employers (Rios, Ling, Pugh, Becker,

& Bacall, 2020). Other research has centered on how the requisite aptitudes and abilities can and should be taught and learned. Theorists are increasingly calling for experiential learning activities inside the classroom to develop students' essential managerial competencies (Bruni-Bossio & Delbaere, 2021; Koys, Thompson, Martin & Lewis, 2019; Niman & Chagnon, 2021, Obi, Eze, & Chibuzo, 2021; Perusso, van der Sijde, Leal, Blanckesteijn, 2021). Others are explaining the urgency of offering carefully designed career development programs that specifically prepare students for lifetimes of employability (Bridgstock, 2009; Chan & Derry, 2013; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Moore & Morton, 2017; Pouratashi, 2019; Savickas et al., 2009). Realizing that both approaches are clearly essential if today's graduates are to successfully contribute their talents to the workplace, the business school at a small, private Midwestern university sought to create a career development program that enabled their students to gain the professional abilities and career-readiness skills essential for their future success. This paper describes that career development program, provides statistical analyses contrasting student survey responses from before the curriculum was implemented with those collected two years after the program was begun. It then, presents data showing students' evaluations of the career program's effectiveness.

LAUNCHING A COMPREHENSIVE CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Founded in 1901, this university is located in near a major metropolitan area and enrolls approximately 2,200 undergraduate students and 900 graduate students. The institution's core values of *Caritas* and *Veritas* have long nurtured a culture of caring and compassion, but also one of rigor and engagement. The expectation is that all graduates will go on to contribute to the "creation of a more just and humane world" as called for in the University's mission statement. Over 40% of the undergraduates are first generation college students and since 2011, the University has been recognized as a Hispanic-serving institution. The business school, which is AACSB-accredited enrolls approximately 400 undergraduates and 100 graduate students, offering undergraduate majors in accounting, economics, entrepreneurship, finance, international business, management and marketing.

The business school faculty have always made substantial efforts to equip students with career management skills, but it was not until 2017 that the school launched a systematic, multi-pronged approach to increase students' career-readiness. A full-time Director of Career Development was hired and after careful consideration of staffing and budgetary resources, the business faculty unanimously approved a comprehensive career development program. The program called for four required, sequential, one-credit Career Development courses, four sequential, experiential, business practicum courses, and participation in a broad range of co-curricular activities. While the career development courses equipped students with the skills needed to navigate such tasks as internship and job searches (i.e., resume coaching, interview skills, salary negotiation strategies, etc.), the business practicums allowed students the opportunity to apply theories learned in their academic coursework to solve concrete problems in settings that provided immediate and meaningful feedback from potential employers and professionals.

An important component of the curriculum was the recruitment and hiring of five Executives-in-Residence (EIR). These individuals had previously enjoyed distinguished careers as executive-level leaders in diverse fields, and they were pleased to begin serving as career mentors to business students. Their presence meant that all business students had easy access to mentors; students were required to meet at least once a year with an EIR as part of their career development courses, ensuring that every student received personalized guidance and support. Several EIRs also taught the four one-credit Career Development courses, infusing in them an abundance of practical advice and up-to-date information about job market realities. Both the career and practicum courses were designed to allow learning to be acquired, applied, and reinforced over time, supporting their professional socialization and refining their career aspirations. See Figure 1 for an overview of the four-year course of study.

Career Course Curriculum

A management professor developed the curriculum for the four sequential career development courses, with substantial input from the Director of Career Development. The Executives-in-Residence (EIRs)

reviewed the curriculum annually and their suggestions were regularly incorporated. The resulting courses were tightly-aligned with various co-curricular activities, many of which students were required to participate in, including activities scheduled inside and outside of class time but which were mandated and graded to fulfill course assignments. See Figure 1. The activities were varied, ranging from attending the school’s C-Suite Lecture Series, career fairs, employer networking events, to having professional headshots taken for their LinkedIn profiles, and participating in mock interviews.

FIGURE 1
CAREER DEVELOPMENT, PRACTICUM COURSES, AND
CO-CURRICULAR COMPONENTS

	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
Car Dev Curriculum (1 Credit Hour Courses)	Managing Your College Career Self Discovery & Planning Dom/BSB Resources & Opportunities Informational Interview Writing for Business Resume BSB Socialization & Expectation Setting	Engaging Opportunities & Exploring Possibilities Increasing Industry Awareness StrengthsFinders Application Capitalize on existing opportunities Business Etiquette Interviewing & Networking Internship Search Dress for Success	Refining Your Presentation of Self Social Media Branding - LinkedIn Interviewing Presentation Skills Industry & Career Knowledge Professional Job Search Process Public Speaking	Managing Your Career Transition from Practice to Profession Active Job Search Performance Management Feedback, Criticism & Praise Negotiations Personal Money & Finances Dealing with Conflict
Practicum Courses (2-3 Credit Hour Courses)	First Year Gateway Student teams developed a sustainable, profitable proposal for a business Developed presentations detailing their ideas Presented ideas to internal and external stakeholders	Entrepreneurship Student teams designed plans for their own small businesses Presented ideas to panel of business professionals Funding awarded to the most promising start-ups	Internship Students worked at internships aligned with their major and career goals Internships vetted and approved to ensure meaningful experiences	Business Capstone Student teams implemented strategy in a competitive business simulation Experienced consequences of their teams' decisions for every functional aspect of enterprise
Co-curricular Components	Community/Volunteer Projects C-Suite Lecture Series Executive-in-Residence (EIR) Program Networking Event Student Clubs	Community/Volunteer Projects C-Suite Lecture Series EIR Program Professional Conference Attendance On-campus interviewing	Community/Volunteer Projects C-Suite Lecture Series EIR Program On-campus interviewing Professional Headshots Study Abroad	Business Consulting Projects CEO Roundtable Company-sponsored initiatives (onsite tours, leaders program) C-Suite Speaker EIR Program

Each one-credit courses had a specific focus. The first year class was designed to help students manage their college careers so they would gain maximum benefit from the many opportunities on campus to develop leadership skills and expand their connections with classmates, faculty and staff. It also required them to look inward to understand better their own values, interests and unique talents and strengths. In this course, students conducted an information interview with a professional to learn more about possible career paths. During the second year course, students completed the CliftonStrengths Assessment and systematically explored the world of work. With the knowledge of their particular strengths from this assessment, students recognized their talents, and began to examine labor markets systematically, identifying internships that aligned with their skillsets. They also learned ways to improve their self-presentation skills, as they polished resumes and cover letters. As they began to understand themselves better, they also developed improved interviewing strategies and learned to navigate job search processes. The culminating project for this course was a mock interview event in which students applied the lessons they had learned during two different conversations with alumni and potential employers. In the third year,

the course concentrated on further developing students' professional and interpersonal skills as they participated in networking events, practiced their public speaking, polished their LinkedIn profiles, and attended career fairs seeking suitable internship opportunities. The fourth year course helped students transition into their new professional roles, providing practical guidance on such topics as negotiating a job offer, preparing for performance reviews, managing difficult co-workers, and soliciting feedback from their supervisors.

Practicum Course Curriculum

To promote experiential learning, the school's new core curriculum also called for students to complete a required practicum course during each of their four years. These classes provided them with experiential opportunities to apply and refine the skills they were developing in the one-credit career classes while also gaining mastery of academic content and engaging with external experts. These practicums included a first year "Gateway" class where entering students were introduced to the disciplines of business. Working in teams, students developed a proposal for a for-profit business that would be both successful and sustainable. They presented their proposal to internal and external stakeholders during a trade-show style event, called the Business Idea Competition. The second course, "Entrepreneurship" examined the issues unique to entrepreneurial and small businesses, enabling students to work in teams to design a business plan for their own small business, which culminated in a competition judged by a panel of business professionals where funding was awarded to the most promising start-ups. Recent research has found that project-based opportunities similar to those provided in the two practicums foster students' sense of career competency (Vander Schee, Andrews, & Stovall, 2022, Alfaro-Barrantes, Beaupré, & Jacobs, 2021).

All third year students completed required internships, which aligned with their career goals and major. The Director of Career Development carefully vetted the internships to ensure that they offered students valuable experiences, and just as importantly, close monitoring and guidance by a site supervisor (Klein & Scott, 2021). Two years of career coursework had prepared students to be successful in securing meaningful internships, and while most students were able to secure relevant, paid internships, some students needed additional support. To meet the needs of students who were not eligible for paid work in the United States (due to citizenship status), the University created opportunities through which a student who was undocumented, for example, could gain meaningful experience. While some students secured internships at for-profit organizations, others engaged in fellowships, Non-Employment Based Opportunities (NEBOs), and entrepreneurial-internships, guided by one of the EIRs who had expertise in forming a business. The vast majority of opportunities provided either scholarships or stipends in order to alleviate the financial burdens placed on students.

In their fourth year, students completed the business capstone class integrating their prior coursework where they worked independently in teams to implement strategy and use their problem solving skills in a competitive business simulation. The simulation required student teams to make decisions regarding strategy, finances, investments, product development, production, marketing, sales, and other aspects of management. Many students reported that the simulation offered an excellent opportunity to experience the many moving parts of an enterprise and to see the immediate consequences of the decisions made by their teams.

RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

Pre- and Post-Curriculum Student Self-Assessment

In spring 2019, when a good number of junior and senior students had experienced parts of the new curriculum, upper-class business students were surveyed anonymously. The goal was to gather students' impressions of their career-readiness, using the same questions that had been asked of junior and senior students in 2014. This allowed a comparison between those who had benefited from the new career curriculum with students who had not. Six questions asked them to rank, on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), their degree of certainty about their chosen career, confidence in their resumes, cover

letters, LinkedIn profiles, and in their ability to introduce themselves and respond to job interview questions (see Table 1).

The 2014 student responses were compared to 2019 student responses using two-sample t-tests assuming unequal variances. The difference between the 2014 and 2019 means were statistically significant for five of the six questions. The students who had experienced all or part of the new curriculum had statistically significantly higher levels of certainty about career choice, confidence in resume quality, and a more positive self-image being projected on LinkedIn compared to 2014 respondents ($p < .001$ for each of these three *t*-tests). The 2019 students, on average, also had greater confidence in answering interview questions compared to the 2014 students ($p = .014$).

In students' assessment of the quality of their cover letter, the average for 2019 ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.14$) is lower than for 2014 ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.03$) at a statistically significant level ($p = .040$). In analyzing this finding, it was concluded that because students had now seen examples of excellent cover letters, they may have become more anxious about their effectiveness in crafting good quality letters. It is certainly one of the harder skills to master. Additionally, many of our students are multilingual and can be more anxious as well as less proficient when writing compared to speaking in English. It could also point to some of the EIRs emphasizing email introductions and LinkedIn profiles more than the traditional cover letter. This finding suggests that the curriculum may be improved, if it were adjusted to include activities designed to increase students' comfort with the evolving types of "cover letter" preparation, which has grown to include not just letters, but introductory email messages and LinkedIn profiles.

TABLE 1
T-TEST OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS FOR
PRE- AND POST-CURRICULUM STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT ^{A, B, C}

Statement	2014			2019			<i>t</i> -test	<i>p</i> -value
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N		
I'm very certain about what career I want.	3.26	1.08	140	3.73	1.02	206	4.14 **	< .001
My resume puts my best professional self forward.	3.38	1.03	134	3.97	0.90	206	5.55 **	< .001
I have an excellent cover letter.	3.38	1.03	134	3.12	1.14	180	-2.06 *	0.040
My LinkedIn Profile puts my best professional self forward.	2.82	1.25	108	3.53	1.17	189	4.87 **	< .001
I can confidently introduce myself to people I've just met.	3.91	0.98	142	4.00	1.02	207	0.85	0.397
I can confidently answer job interview questions.	3.69	0.91	142	3.95	1.03	206	2.47 *	0.014

^a Upperclass students indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a five point scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

^b M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, N = number of students who responded to the item.

* indicates a $p < .05$.

** indicates a $p < .01$.

The difference between the average ratings in 2014 and 2019 for the statement "I can confidently introduce myself to people I've just met" was not statistically significant. Given that the statement does not specify a professional context, such as at a networking event, the finding is not surprising. Nearly all these undergraduates have worked either full-time or part-time to reduce their dependence on loans and debt. Since so many of these students had been successfully hired for part-time jobs, usually in such fields as retail, restaurants, or hospitality, they had reason to be confident about their interpersonal skills irrespective of our curriculum.

It is worth noting that the standard deviations for both years is relatively high, given that it was a five-point scale. This result makes sense because for the upper class students surveyed in 2014, the overall quality of career development depended highly on who provided it and how it was delivered. For example, some faculty incorporated career development activities into their courses, but did not themselves possess any expertise and did not have access to support from the Director of Career Services at that time. For students surveyed in 2019, some portion of them still may have only experienced part of the curriculum, depending on their year of entry. It is also possible that the quality of delivery across the various career development courses was inconsistent. A future goal is to reduce that variation to demonstrate that the program is effectively delivering high quality learning to all students.

Student Ratings of Curriculum Components

The spring 2019 survey also included measures that assessed which aspects of the career development program students found most beneficial. Surveys were completed by 207 students; See Table 2 for their assessment of eighteen career development activities and programs, using a scale of 1 (Limited Value) to 5 (Exceptional Value). Students assessed an activity only if they had participated in it.

Students greatly valued their interactions with the EIRs and indicated, on average, that their meetings were of either Exceptional or Very Positive value ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.04$). Students also ascribed high value ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.18$) to the Headshot Event when students were invited to have a professional photo taken for their LinkedIn Profile at no charge. Students commented on the surveys that these photographs became a concrete symbol that they were making progress in their professional journey toward their eventual career, giving them a tangible symbol of their potential to become successful in the business world. Almost as important to students were the mock interviews with feedback sessions conducted by alumni and local business people ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.21$). Also highly ranked were attendance at a career fair ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.30$) and the opportunity to meet informally with recent graduates and prospective employers at campus networking events ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.26$).

Students' self-reported evaluations of various aspects of the business school's career development program were consistently positive as even those activities and events that they valued least, still generated positive responses. These results are in sharp contrast to the Gallup-Purdue Index Report (2016) which found that among college graduates surveyed nationally; only 52% reported having visited their career services offices while in college. Fairly recent graduates (2010-2016) were more likely to have utilized career services (61%), but only 17% of these recent graduates reported that the career services offices had been very helpful (Gallup-Purdue Index Report, 2016). The infrequency and inconsistency in which students seek out career support services may contribute to students' perceptions of services being ineffective. Most all universities offer a career center providing varying levels of services. But in sharp contrast to the 52% of college graduates who visited their career services office for perhaps a single one-on-one appointment to review their resume or to gather job search materials, students enrolled in this new curriculum required them to attend over forty classroom sessions in which they all learned, over time, how to navigate the various aspects of their potential careers.

The Gallup-Purdue results are reflected in the findings of other studies examining student use of campus career-related resources. Several studies of career services, such as one investigating the usefulness of personal relationships, family connections, experience-based learning such as internships, etc., have shown that the supports available to students may not be meeting their needs (Chin, Blackburn, Cohen, & Hora, 2019; Other studies have come to the same conclusions. (Pesch, Larson, & Seipel, 2018; Savickas et al., 2009; Zondag & Brink, 2017). An article that traced the evolution of career development models in higher education pointed out that present models have not caught up with the socio-economic, technological and generational differences of today's students, leading to students' disillusionment with typical career services programs (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). The authors explained that providing generalized career information, industry statistics and endless job listings is ineffectual in an era when students expect individualized information that specifically relates to their particular interests and needs.

TABLE 2
STUDENT RATINGS OF CURRICULUM COMPONENTS, 2019, 207 STUDENTS ^{A, B}

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Executive-in-Residence	4.31	1.04	139
Headshot Event	4.19	1.18	118
Mock Interview	4.14	1.21	118
Career Fest	3.92	1.30	85
Networking Event	3.85	1.26	95
Informational Interview	3.67	1.37	88
Additional Career Fair	3.67	1.40	60
On-Campus Recruiting Event	3.66	1.36	71
On-Campus Employer Lecture	3.64	1.40	76
CliftonStrengths Assessment	3.59	1.36	110
Future Leaders Program	3.52	1.49	61
On-Campus Interview	3.44	1.50	61
C-Suite Lecture Series	3.44	1.27	103
Etiquette Dinner	3.41	1.53	68
Other Career Assessment	3.38	1.40	61
Fall Interview Day	3.13	1.44	48
Employer Site Visit	3.06	1.43	53
Forum on Corporate Governance	2.71	1.41	49

^aUpperclass students rated each activity on a five point scale, where 1 = Limited Value and 5 = Exceptional Value.

^bStudents did not assess an activity if they had not participated in it.

It is quite understandable that today's students, living in an era of information overload in every domain of their lives, want career support programs that give them meaningful, hands-on experiences, caring mentors and knowledgeable guides to help them understand themselves and the world of work in on a more personalized basis (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). This business school's positive student survey results clearly indicate that this career development program uniquely met such 21st century expectations. This curriculum worked to help students develop, apply and operationalize the knowledge and skills that they had been developing throughout their college journey.

CONCLUSION

As the nation's labor and economic markets strive to reach a post-pandemic equilibrium, professional employment opportunities are likely to be constrained for business students for the foreseeable future. Economists have shown that attractive employment opportunities are becoming increasingly competitive, and consequently, growing numbers of college graduates are employed in positions that may not actually require a college education. Some estimates suggest that as much as forty percent of the workforce is under-employed (Chammorro-Premuzic & Frankiewicz, 2019). Given this reality, the successful career preparation and experiential education offered by this comprehensive career development program has never been more important or necessary, not just for business majors but for students in all academic disciplines. This paper has identified the unique aspects of this carefully designed program.

By the time that students graduated from this business school, each of them has had over forty different classroom sessions that focused on how to prepare for their future careers, well over twenty different events where they interacted with potential employers, and numerous opportunities to engage in high impact

practices and experiential learning opportunities. Just as importantly, this customized, comprehensive curriculum was required for every single business school student, not just the handful who found their way into career services to avail themselves of the resources and programming provided to those who show up. As a result, this program has created a career-readiness culture among business students so that they aspire not only to completing their bachelor's degree, but also to securing meaningful employment in their chosen profession after graduation. The survey data demonstrated that students who experienced the new curriculum were, on average, significantly more certain about their career direction, more confident in their resume and LinkedIn profile quality, and had greater confidence in interviewing than those students who had not experienced the curriculum. This curriculum also expanded students' knowledge of their individual strengths, personal values, and the larger labor market, all of which clarified and shaped their career goals, and helped develop their professional identities. This knowledge and these experiences helped them to be successful, not only in terms of securing their first professional position, but by developing career-building skills to be used across their lifetimes.

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