

Mobilizing business knowledge for meaningful social action: Insights from an undergraduate business curriculum redesign project

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Introduction and Background

Trends in Undergraduate Business Education

A proactive business education curriculum builds bridges between academia (the place where knowledge is created) and agora (the place where the results of academic work can be put to good use); the result is work that has a positive impact on societal well-being¹. It is becoming increasingly urgent that business schools break away from their traditional approaches and make innovation the center of their development. Only then can they attain more radical momentum and achieve their broader societal impact objectives by building stronger bridges.

There is emerging evidence around the globe of a student shift away from a sole focus on shareholder value towards one on stakeholder value encompassing issues of sustainability, equality, and inclusive growth. This reorientation stimulates the creation of more balanced, holistic models of business education curricula. The emphasis is more on creating public value business schools, which requires a critical dialogue between business and other stakeholders – local, regional, national, and international.

Beginning with external trends in the higher education sector as a whole, recent research² highlights a substantial disconnect between university-level business education and employability in the United States. Upon graduation, 38 percent of business students say they hardly use the skills they learned in college and 21 percent say their college did not teach them the business skills needed to do their job. This shortcoming in the transferability of knowledge from the academic setting to the workforce is highlighted by companies as well; the most cited comment from employers is the lack of relevant job skills and career readiness in graduates.

Clearly, the ability of an undergraduate business education to prepare students for the challenges of a connected, globalized, and technologically advanced world of work is

¹ Ulrich Hommel and Martin Meyer, “The Continuously Rewired Business Schools,” AACSB, accessed July 12, 2022, <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2022/06/the-continuously-rewired-business-school>.

² “New Cengage Report Finds Recent College Graduates Feel Underqualified to Enter the Workforce”, PR Newswire, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-engage-report-finds-recent-college-graduates-feel-underqualified-to-enter-the-workforce-301298424.html>.

increasingly being called into question. Simultaneously, the job-related rationale of a university education is taking on greater prominence from a student perspective, as indicated in the proportion of respondents citing the ability to land a better job as a primary decision criterion for enrolment. This issue presents an acute need for universities to articulate a compelling value proposition to key stakeholders – and motivates the fundamental rethinking of our Suffolk Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) curriculum as detailed in the following sections.

Beyond Job Readiness: Fostering Societal Engagement

Instilling knowledge and developing skills that will ensure future employability of graduates, while a central concern for higher education, is supplemented by the need for engagement with more general social issues as well. As key actors in civil society, universities are viewed as institutions that should both respond to and amplify the priorities of their communities. To this end, in addition to basic skills and abilities of relevance to their hiring companies, research also highlights another dimension³ that business education should aim to address: preparing students to lead with purpose by incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) concepts and promoting sustainability and social responsibility. To the extent possible, a modern undergraduate business curriculum should provide space for the contextualization of organizational concepts within this broader social, environmental, and moral framework.

In this same vein, the skills required of business graduates extend beyond mere technical proficiency to a holistic appreciation for the ways in which organizations can (and should) operate within their social milieu. As evidence of this challenge, the World Economic Forum's top 10 job skills⁴ for 2025 include creativity and originality, critical thinking and analysis, resilience and flexibility, leadership and social influence and ideation and complex problem solving, technology use and programming.

These varied and challenging considerations animated our recent work on the wholesale revision of our undergraduate business education curriculum. We next describe the research undertaken to facilitate the comprehensive changes required in this work, and subsequently identify key aspects of the refreshed curriculum.

Methodology

Figure 1 summarizes the methodological approach undertaken for the purposes of revising our core undergraduate business school curriculum. As shown in the exhibit, we began with a detailed secondary research process whereby a variety of external schools (aspirant benchmarks, competitive benchmarks, and peer-comparable benchmarks) were first identified. These universities were then evaluated based on the following criteria: majors, minors, modality of instruction (online versus hybrid versus in-person), credit structure, and technology integration, among others. Based on these criteria, the quality of our current program at the Sawyer Business School was put in perspective and desired changes and preferences were discussed.

³ "Diversity wins: How inclusion matters," McKinsey & Company, May 2020.

⁴ "The Future of Jobs Report 2020," World Economic Forum, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/in-full/infographics-e4e69e4de7>.

Combined with a subsequent survey of key external stakeholders, this information enabled us to identify which main pillars (discussed in more detail below) should form the basis of our revised curriculum. Using these pillars as foundational elements, we next surveyed coordinators of our core undergraduate courses to determine the extent to which these course offerings addressed those various pillars.

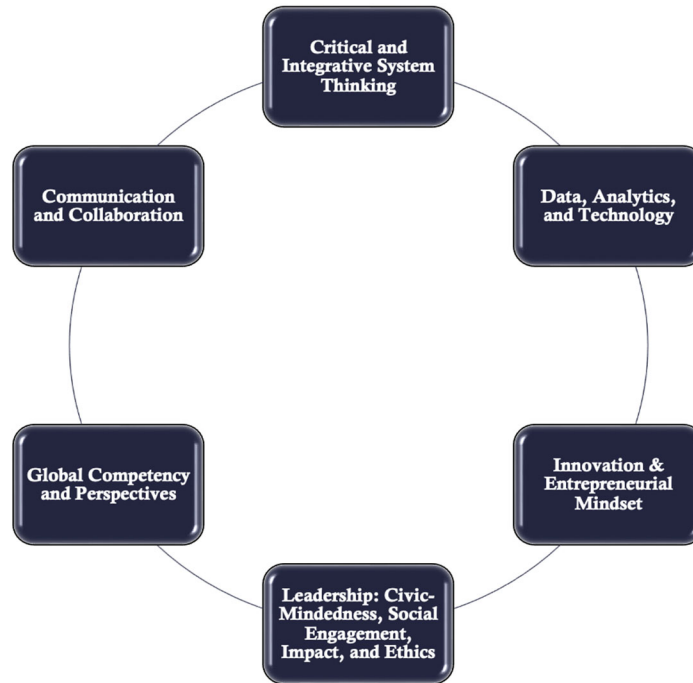
Finally, we constructed an evaluation matrix to assess current strengths, key gaps, and opportunities for stronger thematic coverage of the pillars in our curriculum. Based on discussions with each department within the business school, new courses emerged, existing courses were revised, prerequisite structures were re-evaluated, and new outlooks on departmental collaborations were considered.



Figure 1. Methodological Approach for Core Curriculum Revision Process

Key Findings

In this section we elaborate the major findings from our research effort. These results provide the context for our thoroughgoing revision of the BSBA curriculum, which we also discuss subsequently. Figure 2 also identifies and provides summarized descriptions of the main pillars emerging from our research effort.



Pillars

Definitions

#1 Critical and Integrative System Thinking	Build cognitive skills for solving complex problems. These are role and industry agnostic skills. Courses enforced with this theme may enable students to look at problems at a more macro scale, systematically research and explore complex phenomena through strong problem formulation, develop research road maps, collect and analyze evidence, and form sound conclusions.
#2 Data, Analytics, and Technology	Master analytical and technical skills for solving complex problems
#3 Innovation & Entrepreneurial Mindset	Developing depth in knowledge and wider skillset to comprehend and operate innovation process (e.g., technological, social, process, business). Entrepreneurial mindset is crucial to this process, ability to identify opportunities, question, experiment, and pivot for agile innovation process is key to effective business decisions.
#4 Leadership: Civic-Mindedness, Social Engagement, Impact, and Ethics	Embrace social and impact driven, entrepreneurial, collaborative, and inclusive ethical leadership
#5 Global Competency and Perspectives	Develop knowledge of and openness to diverse cultural values, global power relations, and international systems and their consequences.
#6 Communication and Collaboration	Communicate, including orally and in writing, with clarity and persuasiveness; and, cultivating effective collaborative capabilities

Figure 2. Curriculum Pillars – Structure and Definitions

Lack of Main Pillar Coverage in Existing Curriculum

Having surveyed our course coordinators to ascertain the extent to which our core courses addressed the various pillars, we established a score of 70 (out of 100) as the threshold of quality coverage in that vein. Our existing curriculum passed that threshold in only one pillar – Pillar #1: Critical and Integrative System Thinking. It was clear from

this finding that the existing curriculum under-performed in five out of six main pillars, with the lowest being Pillar #5: Global competence and perspectives.

Coverage and Application of Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning is the process of learning through experience, and can be more narrowly defined as learning through reflection on doing. It makes learning an experience that moves beyond the classroom and strives to bring a more involved way of learning. There are many ways to engage students in the learning experience and make them active participants. In our survey findings, we found that the most commonly used vehicles are case studies, guest speakers, and projects. Though these activities engage students, the feedback process is limited to the instructor of the course. Thus, it is clear that students need to be exposed more to the other feedback sources for continuous learning. Live clients, live client projects, and feedback from professionals excite students and motivate them to work on real-time problems.

Lack of Communication among Core Courses Leads to Overlaps

One of the main findings from our intense research was that courses that are seemingly connected via prerequisites were actually not so closely linked in their executions. Courses do not necessarily check what is being covered or will be covered in the courses with which they have a prerequisite linkage. This leads to overlaps, holes, and inefficiencies in our program structure. Learning goals and objectives in that sense are critical and therefore should clearly communicate the intended takeaways for students from the core courses.

A lack of communication among the syllabi led us to examine the quality of communication among the programs in greater depth. We found that a lack of communication also existed among the majors, and that siloed teaching was present. For example, how can marketing students benefit from accounting and finance courses? How do management courses benefit students of a more technical background? Some majors are by nature close to each other – marketing, management, entrepreneurship, analytics, and finance, accounting. We found that there is an immense opportunity in cross-collaboration. A marketing student benefits highly from finance courses due to the marketing-finance interface; accounting can help entrepreneurship and marketing students immensely; and so on. The new curriculum should address and fully take advantage of this opportunity.

Need for Teaching of Persuasive Communication

Pillar #6 (Persuasive Communication) came out as an important component of the core curriculum. Persuasive Communication covers oral and written communication and effective collaboration. Many external and internal stakeholders commented on its urgency and importance. It was noted as one of the most problematic areas that students lack oral and written skills, and team collaboration is heavily expected yet not being effectively taught to students. We saw this finding as an opportunity in our revised curriculum. It was clear that students should start learning these skills early in their college experience (1st year) so that other core courses can expect and build on this foundation.

Globalization Coverage is Lacking

Research results show that a discussion of global perspectives is left to only two courses in the current core curriculum. This finding leaves us with the insight that students are not consciously exposed to global perspectives between their 1st and 4th years (except in

select major courses). Based on these findings, the new curriculum should have a more thoughtful and focused coverage on global perspectives. Students should be consistently exposed to the global context within which business take place.

Lack of Signature Experience

We have been living in tumultuous times, where the business landscape is constantly shifting. The landscape of *business education* is also constantly moving as a result. It is important for business schools to offer a flagship experience to differentiate themselves in this noisy environment. In our research, we found that our school does not have a strong standing with a flagship experience. Our school possesses key strengths (e.g., eclectic, research focused, diversified faculty, diversified student body, strong presence in urban Boston setting, close proximity to clusters) but they are not fully utilized. There is a rich opportunity to reflect the uniqueness of SBS within our new curriculum by offering a flagship experience every year (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years). We elaborate on this important point in our discussion of the newly designed Tackling Wicked Global Problems course below.

Need for Clear Growth Map

It was also apparent that the growth map for the current curriculum was not consistent. In particular, there is a gap between the first and second year in terms of experience, and the transition between second and third year is not as smooth. Due to the lack of degrees of freedom in the current core curriculum, students do not have time to explore majors in-depth. A significant number of students remain undeclared in their program of studies for a period of time. These issues lead to a decrease in retention rates. There needs to be a consistent pattern of growth; students need to see the road map clearly and should be exposed to majors early in their college experience so that they can see the eclectic opportunities offered at Suffolk. Furthermore, there need to be opportunities for students to work together as diverse teams where they practice their domain knowledge and see how it interacts with other domains.

A Signature New Course Experience: Tackling Wicked Global Problems

The research and analyses summarized above led us to a clear directive – namely, the need to make our undergraduate business curriculum more holistic, experiential, and global in nature. Our vision for the new curriculum was to develop a thematic progression of courses that would allow students to build upon skills in a sequential fashion, and allow them to apply their knowledge in the service of addressing practical (rather than merely academic) challenges.

While the revision process as a whole led to important changes across the core curriculum, we will focus on a particular course – the newly developed ‘Tackling Wicked Global Problems’ (SBS-298) – in the discussion that follows. We do so for two reasons. First, in its internal course logic, SBS-298 functions as a microcosm for the more general modifications made across the set of core business school offerings at Suffolk. Second, as a course that has at its core an experiential focus oriented towards broad social issues involving multiple stakeholders, SBS-298 is truly a signature offering within the BSBA in and of itself.

Tackling Wicked Global Problems is focused above all on the types of multifaceted, intractable social issues to which a constellation of diverse stakeholders bring their own

positions and framings for acceptable solutions – in short, on ‘wicked’ problems. Phenomena such as climate change, global poverty, and equitable access to healthcare services are all examples of such problems, and are all within the remit of SBS-298. In addition, in order to make the topic one of greater immediacy and relevance to the lived experiences of our students, a local component of the wicked problem will be addressed throughout the semester. If climate change, for example, is a global issue, are there specific local solutions that could be envisioned to respond to this challenge?

This course will be housed in the business school but employs a cross-departmental team approach in design and thinking. The intention of SBS-298 is for students to demonstrate their interdisciplinary teamwork skills, communication skills, creative and entrepreneurial mindset skills, and domain specific knowledge skills. This course will meet the expectations of multiple pillars as described in the previous section. In addition, students will experience global and local community engagement – global because the problem (for example, global warming) will be international in scope and local because students will reflect on implications of the problem at a local level (for example, how to reduce the carbon footprint created by traffic congestion in Boston).

Pedagogical Approach

As befits an ambitious course offering such as SBS-298, the pedagogical approach will involve a number of distinct activities and focus levels. The semester begins with a discussion of some foundational topics woven throughout the analysis to follow, with systems thinking primary among these. Interspersed with this early lecture-based approach are guest speakers, experiential exercises, and (importantly) a significant amount of unstructured time provided to student teams to iterate their proposed ‘solutions’ to the wicked problem in question. The discipline that we seek to foster in SBS-298 is one in which our students – with ample guidance and support from faculty as needed – take ownership of the analytical process and strive to identify, refine, and support a proposed recommendation to address the issue.

Integrating Playfulness and i5 Principles into SBS-298

Although the notion of ‘playfulness’ in its colloquial sense may at first glance seem an uneasy fit with such weighty topics as climate change, we aim to foster a sense of playfulness in this course – and across our new curriculum – by encouraging students to ideate, experiment, and revise their approaches to the wicked problem under consideration. The playfulness we construe manifests itself in a willingness to explore ideas in a spirit of curiosity and to rediscover the joy of discovery of new knowledge.

In a related vein, we view our curricular development and the structure of SBS-298 in particular as being congruent with the Impactful Five characteristics of playful learning espoused in the Principles for Responsible Management Education:⁵

Make Learning Meaningful. By virtue of the salient problems tackled in SBS-298, we seek to align this course and our broader curriculum with the values expressed as being of particular importance by our students. According to Stanford University’s Center for

⁵ “The Impactful Five (i5): Learning in Leadership Education,” Principles for Responsible Management Education, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.unprme.org/the-impactful-five-i5>.

Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences⁶, the typical Gen Z member is a self-starter who cares deeply about others; strives for a diverse community; is highly collaborative and social; values flexibility, relevance, authenticity and non-hierarchical leadership; and, while dismayed about inherited issues like climate change, has a pragmatic attitude about the work that needs to be done to address such issues. Around 70 per cent of Gen Z respondents say they want course content that truly reflects the changes occurring in society, from diversity and inclusion to sustainability and poverty. They want business schools to show them how to tackle some of the biggest global challenges facing our world today.

Facilitate Active Engagement. Experiential learning of the type incorporated throughout our new curriculum is intended to encourage deliberate and ongoing student engagement with course material. The diversity of pedagogical approaches cited above represents an explicit attempt to create a learning environment where all students are encouraged to find interesting entry points to the topic under discussion, with active engagement as a primary aim of this undertaking.

Design for Iteration. Ongoing refinement of proposed solutions will be key to the successful deployment of SBS-298. As noted above, we build in sufficient time throughout the semester to allow for student groups to develop, reflect upon, and evolve their thinking on the wicked problem on which they are working.

Develop Supportive Social Interaction. Since a sense of belonging and peer support are crucial factors in student success (both in individual courses and in their broader undergraduate experience), we facilitate productive interactions with faculty members and peers in SBS-298. In a broader sense, our curriculum revision has sought to more fully realize opportunities for interaction in the classroom and through extracurricular activities.

Foster Joy and Well-Being. Finally, in SBS-298 and the BSBA curriculum as a whole, an overriding goal is to activate a sense of joy and wonder on the part of our students. By systematically considering the ways in which students can identify, develop, and eventually master relevant skills and knowledge bases throughout their time in the Sawyer Business School, we hope to create a sense of agency by which the vexing challenges facing our graduates – whether wicked problems or more mundane business issues – can be met with optimism and adventure.

⁶ “Understanding the iGeneration,” Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://casbs.stanford.edu/programs/projects/understanding-igeneration>.

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