LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND EXPERIENTIAL ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This study represents an outcome assessment of an integrated business program at a West Coast university within the College of Business and Public Management (CBPM). Finance, management, and marketing courses were integrated into a highly structured, single 12-unit course and an experiential four-unit learning entity.

The study concluded that participating in this course enhanced students’ understanding of entrepreneurship and how the various disciplines were integrated in a business environment. The authors determined through statistical analysis of comparative grades in this course versus the same un-integrated courses taught by the same instructors and the content analysis of the students’ comments that such integration had positive outcomes.

Key Words: Learning Communities, Experiential Education; Integrated Curriculum; Linked Courses; Integrated Courses; Integrated Business Program.

INTRODUCTION

There has been much criticism of higher education in recent years. One significant concern is that students in a traditional undergraduate program complete classes without understanding how topics or disciplines are linked holistically. Students tend to work in isolation, absorb course information, pour it into exams, presentations, or papers, and progress to the next semester without any synthesis of knowledge (Hill, 1985; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 2003). A potential solution for this problem is the delivery of education through learning communities.

The definitions of learning communities vary, but simply, a learning community is the combination or integration of sets of courses within different disciplines (with something in common) taught to the same cohort of students (Cross, 1998; Tinto, 2003). An overarching goal is to enable students to apply knowledge in a real-world sense by combining information from
various disciplines and implementing appropriate co-ordinated projects (Cross, 1998; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 2003).

This paper discusses an integrated business program developed at a West Coast university within the College of Business and Public Management (CBPM). Marketing, finance, and management were integrated into a single 12-unit course with an experiential four-unit learning component. The program was initiated in the fall semester of 2011. While there is sparse data available concerning the assessment of outcomes of such programs (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson & Roberts, 1998; Borden & Rooney, 1998; Knight, 2002), this paper highlights two methods of evaluation of the program. First, the students’ qualitative reflections on outcomes in comparison to traditional classes to expand the literature are included. There is a significant gap in the literature concerning student perspectives of integrated programs. Second, assessment data is being collected by the CBPM to compare student grades in the same traditional courses taught by the same professors with those in the Integrated Business Program (IBP). This limited data was analyzed and preliminary results are presented in this paper because grade results are also lacking in the literature.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY: BACKGROUND

The effort to close the gap between what colleges offer and what the real-world needs comprises many different approaches. Objectives of curricula are to not only enable students to apply knowledge directly to jobs, but to nurture an entrepreneurial spirit in students. One approach to accomplishing these goals is to offer entrepreneurial programs or courses. These programs are provided at graduate and undergraduate levels and could incorporate a number of concepts including initiating a new business, business consulting, managing a company, or venture plan writing and financing (Vesper & Gartner, 1997).

Another widespread method is a community outreach program. These programs can have a number of different structures including a dedicated class or projects within classes, but the aim is to strengthen relationships between the college and the community and to engage students in the idea of giving to the community with a real-world view (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). Also, business plan competitions predominate worldwide on many college campuses. Developing a business plan for a new business venture allows students to apply learned skills to introduce a new product or service to encourage innovative behavior in students; competitions are often financially supported by corporations (Russell, Atchison, & Brooks, 2008). Simulation is another means of having students integrate knowledge from many courses and use it in a computerized game environment, often seen in senior seminar or capstone courses (Vogel, et al., 2006).

The approach to provide a theory-to-practice environment chosen by this University, based on specific objectives and available resources, was a learning community. The concept of a learning community has a long, rich history and could be arguably linked to the ideas of educator John Dewey at the beginning of the 20th century. Dewey posited that a learning...
environment consisting of a close teacher/student relationship, learning by doing, and developing skills to enhance reasoning capabilities promoted lifelong learning (Dewey, 1916). Meiklejohn advanced these ideas by supporting integrated or connected knowledge. His Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin from 1927-1932 was one of the first structured ventures into a learning community environment (Meiklejohn, 1981). From these early roots, many learning community programs have been initiated.

Although the methods, topics, and organization of learning communities vary, many reasons and potential benefits exist for launching such programs. Structures could include introducing freshmen to college life by integrating discipline-based courses with freshman seminars, assisting at-risk or minority students by linking academic and developmental courses, connecting courses within a major, or integrating courses within disciplines (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Expected outcomes are as varied as the structures of learning communities, but one major benefit is to more adequately ensure that students are prepared for careers. Other goals include connecting professors and students, allowing students to assess how courses and disciplines are integrated, developing faculty, addressing real-world problems within disciplines, and increasing college completion rates (Cross, 1998; Hill, 1985). Professors can connect courses to ensure that students apply material from one course to the other courses. This linkage enhances relationships, both intellectual and social, among the students and helps them bond in the form of a community (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

In an effort to redress concerns from corporate America and accrediting entities, business schools are rapidly becoming involved with learning communities to support theory-to-practice (Barber, Borin, Cerf, & Swartz, 2001; Hamilton, McFarland, & Mirchandani, 2000; Heinfeldt & Wolf, 1998; Pharr, 2000). To emphasize the importance of learning communities in the business curriculum, the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) 2000 Standard C 1.3. E indicates that “The curriculum should integrate the core areas and apply cross functional approaches to organizational issues” (AACSB, 2000).

With much attention focused on learning communities, it would be expected that significant research would be available on the assessment of the programs. However, research concerning assessment is sparse. Barefoot, Warnock, Richardson, & Roberts (1998) relate to the problem of status of the programs within the university and operating on limited budgets. Borden and Rooney (1998) and Knight (2002) were able to identify higher retention and recruitment as positive outcomes of the programs. Additionally, initial assessment of business integrated programs appears to demonstrate mixed results with issues such as lack of funding and faculty buy-in cited frequently in the literature (Borin, 2004; Hartenian, Schellenger, & Fredrickson, 2001; Pharr, 2000). Likewise Smith (2001) iterates that faculty acceptance could be remiss because individuals are concerned about tenure and promotion and are unsure where the programs fit in the advancement structure. However, the lack of assessment of learning outcomes based on student input and grade comparison between non-integrated and integrated courses is evident.
Learning outcome assessment components in these courses consisted of quizzes/exams and participation. Additionally, the professors established rubrics to evaluate the development of the business plan. Implementation of the business plan was measured including achievement of stated goals and the demonstration of adoption of new strategies as needed over the semester. Peer evaluations were also used. Although there is a plethora of research on evaluation of learning outcomes (see Astin, 2012; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Prosser & Trigwell, 1991), the professors involved with the IBP identified the lack of assessment of learning outcomes in the literature in a learning community environment. Also, analysis based on student input and grade comparison between non-integrated and integrated courses was sparse.

Due to a dearth of literature on assessment of these programs, the professors involved with this University’s integrated business program felt it was important to add to the assessment literature to assist colleges in the development of similar programs. Although in its infancy, the outcomes in the program outlined in this paper have been positive and significantly expand the scope of learning community research and evaluation of student learning.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTEGRATED BUSINESS PROGRAM (IBP)

Program's Purpose

The purpose of the Integrated Business Program within the College of Business and Public Management is to enhance student learning through an integrated business curriculum by combining finance, management, and marketing into a single 12-unit course and to overlay the integration with a four-unit experiential learning course component. During the semester, the students form a company, determine a target market and product, develop a business plan, seek a loan from a bank, and sell the product throughout the semester.

As a lesson in social responsibility, profits are donated to a non-profit entity of their choice. The charities selected were the American Cancer Society, the Leroy Haynes Center which serves more than 450 boys and girls of all ages and their families through programs that include: Non-Public School, Residential Treatment, Mental Health Services and Community Outreach, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Greater Los Angeles which helps grant a wish to children between the ages of 2 ½ through 18 with life-threatening medical conditions.

Expected outcomes include:

1. Students should be able to demonstrate at least the same level of functional competency that can be achieved in the traditional delivery mode.
2. Students should be able to identify the interdependence of the three functional areas and the impact on decision-making.
3. Students will acquire a real-life reference point that they can utilize in their remaining business core courses and electives.
4. Students should be able to demonstrate that they are socially responsible citizens by operating their business in an ethical manner and giving back to their communities.

Organization

All four courses are scheduled for the same days. The three academic courses are scheduled during morning and early afternoon hours. The experiential course or practicum is scheduled for later in the afternoon so the students can apply the lessons learned in the previous class sessions.

There is also a student advisor assigned to the program. The advisor has taken the program previously and acts as a consultant. The advisor does not direct the efforts of the students, but acts as a resource when the students have questions about aspects of their business. The advisor also records notes for each class session and sends them to the instructors after each class. The notes are used to adjust classroom material and to anticipate future problems.

Student Profile

The program consists of traditional-aged students who are mainly sophomores and juniors. The courses are part of the core requirements for a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration so seniors currently in the system would usually have taken these courses earlier.

The University has a highly diverse student population in terms of both gender and ethnic background so there is a wide range of experience in the classes. Most students have some work experience at entry-level jobs. Some students continue to work while enrolled in the program.

The Business Plan Process

The first activity for the students in this program is to select a target market, then a product. The second activity is to organize their company with respect to the key managers: President, Vice President of Finance, Vice President of Operations, Vice President of Marketing, and Vice President of Sales. This proved to be a significant challenge because the students had no prior experience in starting a company.

A considerable amount of time was spent in accomplishing these tasks. This placed pressure on the students because they had less time to sell and distribute their product. In recognition of this, the participating faculty arranged meetings with the students well in advance of the beginning of the semester. The task of accomplishing these activities was presented to the students along with introducing the students to their student advisors. The advisors were students who had completed the program successfully.

The students were also given a weekly schedule for the semester which presented the topics for each course for each week. In addition, the meeting with the bankers (see description on page 10) was also scheduled along with a dress rehearsal to be held one week prior to the
meeting. Strong emphasis was placed on completing the business plan well in advance of the meeting with the bankers. The major sections of the business plan are presented below:

1. **Executive Summary**
   This section serves as an introduction to the company. The section is a one-page description of the product, the market, operations, management, capital budget, and projections of revenues and expenses.

2. **Operations**
   This section describes the day-to-day activities of the company. It includes a description of the product along with any technical details, if appropriate. The primary supplier of the product and alternative sources of supply are presented. The analysis used in selecting the primary supplier is also presented.

   Inventory control procedures are an integral part of this section. If sales are higher than forecasted, detailed plans for ordering, shipping times, and inventory management are shown here.

3. **Management**
   The management part of the integrated business plan focused on examining basic concepts of management theories, functions and applications in an intercultural context.

   This section reviewed the primary management functions of planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling and considers cultural variations in selection and implementation of approaches. Course content included discussion of current topics including learning organizations, transformational leadership, continuous quality improvement, and employee empowerment. The importance of consideration of ethics, social responsibility, and the impact of cultural diversity on management practices and globalization of business is discussed throughout the course. Effective decision making processes, the importance of interpersonal skills, and the ability to operate successfully in groups are stressed.

   In addition to introducing the subject of management history and current thinking, the management portion of this integrated course focused on the following topics:

**Part A: Organizing and Organizational Structure**

   In this part, students learned the fundamentals of organizing and how to define their organizational objectives (including guidelines for quality objectives) and how to achieve such objectives. Additionally, while students learned the organization’s responsibility, authority, and delegation, they were introduced to the subject of organizational structure and design and learned how to design their organization and perform the job descriptions and specifications of the major tasks.
Part B: Strategic Planning

The students learned how to state their goals (including sales and profits) and how to address the subjects of their organization’s strategic planning, tactics, and their organization competitive advantage and competitive landscape. SWOT analysis was emphasized. Additionally, they were asked to address and plan for growth.

Part C: Decision Making

In this part, students learned the importance and the process of making the right decisions to ensure management success. Additionally, ethical practice, a code of ethics, how the organization will be socially responsible, and how to sustain the organization were emphasized.

Part D: Summary

Finally, while the students were told and encouraged to focus on the above-mentioned subjects, they were also asked to make intelligent assumptions in their plan. It was emphasized to them that creativity will most likely be necessary since they will not have access to much market data and that they need to be sure to clearly state any assumptions made and to include additional information in each section other than the questions and topics highlighted above.

It is important to note that various management topics were also introduced to the students including diversity, managing in the global arena, organizational change, stress, organizational conflict, communication, groups and teams, culture, motivation, leadership, and controlling.

4. Marketing

As mentioned previously, there was an initial meeting with the students well ahead of the start of the semester. The purpose of this meeting was to help them gain an understanding of the challenges of the program, but also to encourage early thinking about the target market and a possible product. The meeting with the bank was scheduled five weeks from the start of the semester, so writing the business plan was their first major task. The SWOT analysis was completed in the Management course, so the marketing team first investigated target markets based on potential opportunities. This was done through secondary research concerning size, demographics, lifestyles, and purchase behavior of their identified target markets.

The students also spoke to people in the potential target markets to gain anecdotal data. Concurrently, they were considering products that would add value to the target markets and began to talk to suppliers. Ideally, the students should have the target market and product clearly determined and justified in the business plan before the start of the semester. They also stated how they wanted to be positioned in the marketplace based on an image that would be significant and meaningful to their target market.

Once the target market and positioning statement were complete, they began to develop survey strategies for their target market to assist with sales forecasts, product colors and sizes,
and pricing. They developed the 4Ps of the marketing mix consisting first of the product description, producer information, product photos, and specific benefits for the target market. Future target markets with subsequent versions of the product or different products were also elaborated in the plan. Labeling and packaging concepts were included.

Promotional plans were developed in alignment with the lifestyle and purchasing behavior of their target market. Because the students typically choose college students as their target market, social media was at the center of promotional activity with Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The promotional mix has consisted of advertising on the campus radio station and in the campus newspaper, flyers on campus, and on monthly calendars distributed by the Campus Activities Board. They developed websites for their companies from which customers could place orders. They also identified public relations opportunities, such as having articles written about the project in the campus newspaper. The majority of the activities in the promotional plan consisted of personal selling with tables at campus events and on other days. Sales promotional tools such as contests were also used while they were selling on their own or on other college campuses.

Many distribution strategies are typically discussed, but because of the time limitation of one semester, a direct channel to the target market is typically chosen.

Pricing is determined from the results of “willingness to buy” questions in their surveys. They also had chosen a main vendor at this point and they know the cost of goods sold. The financial group then gets involved with all expenses to finalize a price.

Finally, they develop a calendar of scheduled events with students assigned to each. Once the loan from the bank was obtained, the teams began to implement marketing strategies. An important part of this implementation was evaluation as they proceeded and making adjustments as necessary to meet forecasted sales.

5. **Finance**

The Finance course in the program was presented in two major sections. The first part of the course presented topics that were relevant to the business plan. The second part of the course presented topics that are part of a traditional undergraduate course.

The topics presented in the early part of the course included time value of money, short term financial management, capital budgeting, inventory management, working capital management, and ratio analysis. The latter part of the course included capital structure, financial forecasting using the percent of sales method, stock and bond valuation, risk and return and the capital asset pricing model, investment banking, and international finance.

Financing for the company was in the form of a loan from a national bank that donated funds to the university. The bank sent two bank officers to review the presentations and make comments on the viability of the proposals. The form of the financing was a line of credit with standard terms offered to established businesses.
After presenting the time value of money concept, extensive time was spent on financial projections. An actual business plan with a capital budget and projections was made available to the students. The sections of the business plan were discussed as they related to the budget and projections. The guiding principles for the class discussions were a thorough understanding of the business and the presentation to the bankers to secure the financing.

The projections focused on integrating short and long term financial management. As stated above, the bank presentation took place in week 5 of a 15 week semester. The projections included revenues and expenses weekly for 10 weeks and annually for the next 3 years. Numerous drafts were reviewed by the faculty and revised by the students before a final version was completed.

The next section of the course focused on short-term cash and inventory management. Topics included formulating a short-term cash budget which integrated anticipated revenue collection policies coordinated with inventory purchases. This exercise assisted students in preparing cash flow statements on a weekly basis.

The in-depth analysis necessary to prepare the budget and projections prepared the students for the detailed questions from the bankers. After the students received the loan and began operations, they were required to submit income statements, balance sheets, and cash flow statements on a weekly basis. The lesson learned by all students was the importance of accurate record-keeping for all aspects of the business including purchases, inventory, sales, expenses, and cash balances.

In some cases, accurate and timely information was not provided. The students were then advised that the CFO could not complete the financial statements without information from the other departments in the company. As a result, the students were informed that the final grade would reflect the lack of accurate financial information on a continuing basis.

In one instance, the COO placed a large order for new inventory with only three weeks left in the semester. There was no coordination with the CFO, Vice President of Sales, or the President. This demonstrated a lack of financial controls and committed the company to a high level of sales to clear out the inventory by the end of the semester. This necessitated a more direct involvement by the finance instructor to educate the students as to the numerous mistakes committed in this incident.

The financial results comprised 25 percent of the final grade in the finance course. Adjustments were made for the overly optimistic initial sales projections and credit was given for achieving a reasonable level of profits. The major lesson learned by the students was the importance of accurate record-keeping and the relevance of accounting statements in making sound business decisions.

**Bank Presentations**

A national bank donated the initial funding for the program and allocated the services of two commercial loan officers to assist in the evaluation of the student businesses. After the
business plan was completed, a meeting was arranged with the students to make a formal presentation to the bankers as part of the loan application process.

Approximately one week prior to the meeting, a dress rehearsal was held in which the students presented their business plan to the faculty. The faculty asked questions similar to those anticipated to be asked by the bankers. In addition, comments were made on the style of the presentation, the students’ appearance, and other details.

The students then presented the marketing, operations, and financial aspects of their business to the bankers. To the credit of the bank and the bankers, the presentation was taken as a serious application for a business loan. The bankers also treated the students as business professionals. The bankers did not “talk down” to the students, nor were any concessions made for the students’ lack of experience.

Upon completion of the meeting, the bankers informed the students that they would review the business plan and the financial projections and reply with a loan proposal promptly. The students were informed that there was a possibility that the loan application could be denied. Given the close involvement of the faculty and the comprehensive preparation by the students, the risk of being denied was minimal.

The bankers responded with loan terms typical of a commercial line of credit. The terms included an interest rate calculation based on the prime rate plus a spread of 5 percent. The remaining terms addressed the maximum amount of time that the loan could be outstanding and the purpose for the funding.

At the end of the semester, a second meeting was held with the bankers to review the progress of the business. There was no dress rehearsal since the students had prior experience meeting with the bankers. The financial statements for the business were sent to the bankers prior to the meeting so the bankers were well-prepared.

The bankers asked for an explanation of actual revenues and earnings compared to projected revenues and earnings. Again, the bankers treated the students as business professionals and expected detailed explanations for the results. The bankers also asked the students for their views and opinions of the integrated program. In general, the students responded that they had no prior understanding of the relationship among the various departments in a business and the attention to detail necessary for success.

Resources

The design and implementation of the integrated program required significant time and financial commitment by the University. The Dean and four faculty attended an Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) conference in the summer of 2010 to begin the process of designing the curriculum. Efforts continued during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Since the courses have prerequisites, student advisors and faculty were notified of the new program and began to recruit students for the fall semester of 2011. The advisors also suggested to other students that they arrange their schedules so that these students could qualify
for the program in future semesters. The enrollment was 5 students in the fall, 2011 semester, 8 students in the spring 2012 semester, and 24 students in the fall, 2012 semester.

The response from the faculty and the students for the 2011-2012 academic year was extremely enthusiastic. As a result, the Integrated Business Program may be required of all students entering in September, 2013.

Although it is difficult to associate a specific dollar value to the time commitment of the faculty and administrators in the College of Business and Public Management, some of the direct costs associated with such a program included:

1. Cost of visits to campuses having experience with an integrated business program
2. Faculty training through attendance at conferences
3. Development of unique instructional material
4. Annual cost for the coordinator of experiential learning
5. Annual delivery cost after the development of the program

If possible, the faculty assigned to the program should have prior business experience. The students will be asking practical questions about their business and require practical answers.

During the semester, the faculty responsible for the program met weekly to exchange information about their experiences in their respective courses. This helped in identifying problems in one course that could have affected the other courses. For example, personality conflicts among the students in one course may not necessarily manifest themselves in the other courses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study assesses the outcomes of the Integrated Business Program in helping students to relate academic material to actual business settings and create a positive learning community. The research methods used in this study tested variables related to the students’ understanding and learning of three business integrated courses (i.e. finance, management, and marketing). The courses are complemented with a practicum to execute learning via the creation of an actual business for profit.

The methodology to assess such results is based on interpretation of responses obtained from the student participant testimonials in addition to a comparative analysis of the IBP students’ grades to grades of other student groups who did not take the integrated course, but were taught by the same professors.

The study included 13 college business majors who participated in the IBP program in the fall and spring semesters of the 2011/2012 academic year and 24 students in the fall of 2012, a total of 37 students.
Procedure

Student participation in this study was voluntary and survey responses were confidential. Participating students were asked to write a one page plus or minus testimonial regarding their experiences (positive and/or negative). To ensure the validity and the confidentiality of the collected information, said testimonials were done after the end of the semester and after students were given their final grades.

Participants’ grades were compared to a control group of students who did not participate in the IBP, but were taught the same classes by the same professors. No consideration was given to other testing factors such as the student’s ethnic background, gender, progress towards his/her degree, belief about academic preparedness, or financial status.

Participants and Setting

The sample included 37 business students who participated in the integrated business course who are referred to as the experimental group (n=37) of which 46% were women (n=17) and 54% were men (n=20).

In addition to comparing their grades with non-participants (the control group), participants were given a blank piece of paper in the classroom and asked to write what aspects of this program were satisfying (or dissatisfying) to them personally and helped them (or did not help) understand the subject matter. Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of students (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>100.00</td>
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Research Propositions

The following a priori propositions were developed by the researchers:

**Proposition 1:** A positive relationship will be found to exist between participation in the IBP and students’ increased understanding of the business disciplines.

**Proposition 2:** It will be found that after participation in the IBP, the mean grades of each subject (i.e. finance, management, and marketing) will be higher than the mean of non-participating students’ grades (control group) for the same subjects that were taught by the same professors.

**Proposition 3:** It will be found that after participation in the IBP; the desire to take more integrated classes is preferred by participating students (the experimental group).
RESULTS

Grade Analysis

The statistical evaluation consisted of testing for differences between the mean grades expressed as a percent in each of the classes in the IBP compared to the mean grades in conventional courses for each discipline. Table 2 presents the sample sizes, means, and standard deviations for each class.

Two sets of tests were conducted assuming that the variances are unequal and then assuming the variances are equal. The p-values are shown in Tables 3 and 4. The p-value is the probability of obtaining a test statistic at least as extreme as the one that was actually observed, assuming that the null hypothesis is true. (Keller, 2011). Another definition is that the p-value describes the likelihood of observing certain data given that the null hypothesis is true (Wikipedia, n.d.). Another explanation is that the p-value measures the probability of finding a sample at least as far from the mean as the sample we have.

The higher the p-value, the higher the chances are that the data confirm the null hypothesis. The lower the p-value, the lower the chances are that the data confirm the null hypothesis.

The null hypothesis is that there is no difference between the grades. Therefore, a low p-value supports the conclusion that the data do not confirm the null hypothesis and that there is a significant difference between the two sets of grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Students’ Grades Comparison Per Academic Subject With IBP (N= 37)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2010</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Non IBP/IBP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Management</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>IBP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter, 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Non IBP/IBP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2011 A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring, 2011 B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Non IBP/IBP</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 IBP student only audited the management class since said student had already fulfilled its requirements and passed it a one semester ago. That made the management’s class size only 12.
Table 3 presents the p-values of testing whether the differences between the mean grades are significant. In addition, the variances were assumed to be unequal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Subject</th>
<th>P Values*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBP and Spring, 2011 A</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBP and Spring, 2011 B</td>
<td>.4062347</td>
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</table>

* Note: all values are significant at the 5% level.

Table 4 presents the results assuming that the variances are equal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Subject</th>
<th>P Values*</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>IBP and Spring, 2011 B</td>
<td>.013612602</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Note: all values are significant at the 5% level.

**INTERPRETATION OF STATISTICAL RESULTS**

The results support Proposition 2 that the grades in the IBP program are significantly higher than the grades in the conventional courses. There are four possible explanations for the statistical results shown above. The first is that the students were highly motivated to make their companies successful so they put aside any personality differences and performed as a cohesive group. The students spend extensive hours working together outside of class. This afforded them the opportunity for the stronger students to help the weaker students.

The second reason relates to the title of the program. The students were able to integrate the learning from the three courses so the students could identify the interrelationship of the three disciplines. This facilitated the learning in each discipline.
The third reason concerns motivation. Since the IBP program is voluntary, there is an element of self-selection. The students were made aware of the program by their advisers, but the decision to participate was theirs. This led to an enrollment of students who showed above-average motivation, effort, and commitment.

The fourth reason concerns faculty involvement. The commitment of the faculty to the success of the program may have led to a subconscious bias in awarding grades. However, weekly faculty meetings did not indicate such bias based on the individual comments of the faculty.

STUDENT REACTIONS

Content Analysis

The students were asked to write a one-page paper with reflections concerning outcomes and the positive and negative aspects of the program, as stated above. Using content analysis with involvement from the four participating professors, several themes emerged. The papers were read and coded individually by the professors, then, through several face-to-face conversations, the codes were aggregated into themes. Sample responses included in this paper have been reproduced verbatim.

Integration of Course Material and Real World Experience

A primary theme emerged supporting Proposition 1 because a positive relationship was found to exist between participation in the IBP and students’ increased understanding of the business disciplines. All of the students discussed the advantages of having the course material integrated. They felt that they now understand how these disciplines work together within a business and they were not just memorizing content to get a good test grade. In the discussion, comments were also captured about the comparison of this course environment to traditional class delivery.

“It has truly made me see business as a whole. Even though someone just wants to get into finance, understanding within the different parts of business is absolutely crucial.”

“The overall integrated structure and professor coordination efforts have created stronger and more positive learning environments for students while reinforcing the course material through practice application.”

“The program was beneficial in the experience it gave. We learned marketing (target markets, advertising, and social media), finance, and management. We all had to figure things out together.”
“The integrated business program has more value to offer when compared to taking the same courses without coordinating professors. A course on its own would cause confusion because the core concepts would be introduced at different time periods.”

Proposition 3 was also supported with statements from the students about the limitations of a typical class environment in comparison to the integrated approach.

“I can’t imagine taking regular classes next semester.”

“I strongly believe that I will see my future courses at [University] in a new light. I no longer will think, “What do I need to memorize/study to get an A on this test?”, but rather, “How can I use this information in the world of business?”

“I was able to put the topics covered in class into action in real life.”

“This program has been the highlight of my college career. I leaned so much through the hands-on experience and I feel that I can apply all that I’ve learned in this course to the real-world after I graduate.”

In addition to the above supporting statements for Propositions 1 and 3, there were many other outcomes considered important to the participants as discussed below.

**Collaboration and Conflict**

All of the students had some comment about interaction with each other and how they worked together as a team. Their statements emphasized how much more important teamwork was in this program in comparison to a traditional course because it was a real-world environment. They had much more need to work together for the company to succeed and there could be no slackers. They discussed how they overcame many conflicts to evolve to a more collaborative environment. Understandably, initial conflicts occurred when choosing the product they would market.

Some comments were:

“With different personalities came different opinions and perspectives. Although our views may have clashed, each person’s opinion was valuable in moving the company forward.”
“There were times where people will butt heads with each other, especially when deciding on the product, however, we solved it in the practicum.”

“We had long, long discussions throughout the semester to solve our problems, especially with product ideas, then the sales forecast. All opinions were valuable.”

“I think we learned how to communicate with each other and really listen to everyone.”

“Maybe we had disagreements with some teammates, but we moved on.”

**Shift in Group Dynamics**

As might be expected in this type of immersed situation, group dynamics changed over the semester. To evolve from a group of people who did not know each other to a cohesive group, communication skills as discussed above were honed. All of the students discussed how the group changed over the semester.

“We moved from “I” to “We.” We worked together on sales, for example. We didn’t care about particular individual sales – we worked for the company.”

“We found that we had to have discipline. With inventory management, I had a phone message every day asking them for their numbers. We all had to be responsible.”

“We had to develop skills and we helped each other, for example, having to sell the product. We all had to do this, although I found this is probably not what I want to do.”

“What we learned about teamwork helped me in the next semester. For example, I am able to delegate work much better and I understand the need to build relationships.”

“Towards the end, I could really see our team come together as reflected in our sales.”
Professional Communication Skills

All of the students discussed how the real-world experience of starting a business enhanced their professional communication skills in addition to inter-personal communication skills as discussed above. The most important presentation was to the bank to obtain a loan, using their business plan. Over the two semesters, the students also gave presentations to the President of the University, student groups, vendors, and classes. These presentations had significant performance pressure – more than the students had experienced previously.

“I have NEVER rehearsed so much for a presentation”

“Then there was the ‘heart-stopper’ presentation to the bank. We had to overcome fear.”

“I learned how to communicate with the vendor one-on-one”

“I think having to go out and talk about our product and company was most difficult, but it helped me with my communication skills.”

“It was interesting to learn how to develop a relationship with a vendor.”

“As the semester went along, our communication improved as we learned how to manage others.”

In summary, the analysis of student responses strongly supported propositions one and three and the students believed they could apply what they learned in future employment. Although there were suggestions for improvement in the course, which were welcomed, there are no students to date who indicated they would not recommend the course to others.

LIMITATIONS

This study contributes to the knowledge of the relationships between integrated courses (learning community) and students’ knowledge gained in comparable independent courses. However, the study has some limitations. One limitation is that it has a small learners sample (i.e. n=37) and occurred within three semesters. This sample may not have been sufficiently large to generalize the results. Therefore, more students are needed to have a larger sample and observations should be extended to more than three terms (perhaps two or more years).
Another limitation of the study was that it used a sample of students who registered for one particular integrated course at the University. Therefore, the conclusions reached are not generalizable to the entire country, different countries, or to other academic institutions. Further research with a larger statistically random sample across the U.S. is required to assess the applicability of these findings to the general population of students who are actively engaged in community learning circles.

However, the researchers suggest that qualitative studies and structured interviews with focus groups of students and instructors should be continue to be conducted to examine the causal relationships between integrated courses and knowledge gained in comparable independent courses.

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed, at the end of the semester in which the first IBP was offered, the professors initiated an evaluation process consisting of the group of students orally discussing the course, as well as an individually written reflective paper. The initial intent of this student evaluation was to determine how to ameliorate the course for the next semester. However, the comments were overwhelmingly positive and other significant factors emerged, so the professors involved wanted to continue collecting comments over subsequent semesters and share the research with others who may be considering such a program.

In a meta-analysis of student evaluation literature, Clayson (2009) determined that student evaluations are not necessarily linked to what the student thinks he/she has learned as there are many situational factors involved such as nature of the course, personality of the professor, and the type of evaluative tool used. The advantage of the qualitative research format used in this study was that it allowed the students to express extemporaneously and openly what they felt they had learned (or not learned) in the IBP format. With this method, in-depth knowledge was gained concerning why they felt they had learned more in the IBP program, enhancing the literature on student evaluations linked to community learning programs, which has been previously lacking.

The authors determined through the statistical analysis of comparative grades and the content analysis of the students’ comments, that the propositions were positively confirmed. The first proposition was:

**Proposition 1:** A positive relationship will be found to exist between participation in the IBP and students’ increased understanding of the business disciplines.

The content analysis confirmed that students fully understood the business topics and how they fit together. Most importantly, they felt they could apply principles and theories in a
real-world environment and they felt more comfortable about applying knowledge in an experiential way.

**Proposition 2:** It will be found that after participation in the IBP, the mean grades of each subject (i.e. finance, management, and marketing) will be higher than the mean of non-participating students’ grades (control group) for the same subjects that were taught by the same professors.

The quantitative analysis of grades comparing non-integrated to integrated courses established that grades were higher in the integrated course. Although the data are limited, this matches with the students’ comments about recognizing that they had to use the material to run their business, not simply memorize it to gain a good grade on an exam or completed assignments.

**Proposition 3:** It will be found that after participation in the IBP; the desire to take more integrated classes is preferred by participating students (the experimental group).

The student narratives also supported this proposition. The comments confirmed that they were not looking forward to future courses they had to take in a non-integrated format. They also discussed how much more knowledge was gained about business disciplines in the integrated program.

Some unexpected positive results also emerged from the content analysis. Students learned valuable lessons in collaboration and listening to teammates to ensure all ideas were considered. In addition to that, they also understood the value of discipline, commitment to implementation, and making changes as appropriate to achieve goals.

In conclusion, the program within this University has been deemed highly successful from students’ perspectives and grade achievement. Although more research should be conducted, these authors posit that colleges should seriously discuss and consider such integrated programs to more explicitly connect with the needs of business. Current research of learning communities is limited and focuses on problematic issues such as faculty involvement and resources or positive strategic outcomes including retention and recruitment and not student outcomes. Therefore, from an academic perspective, these results contribute significantly to the research on assessment of integrated programs. Likewise, the study assists other universities considering the development of similar programs.
REFERENCES


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