

BUSINESS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Educational partnerships that assist students in making the transition from school to the world of work are among the most common and most successful of all partnerships (Educational Partnership Case Studies-February 1996). In gathering information for our project, we found that many "school to work partnerships" were formed with the intention of helping a student make the transition from high school to the work force. At Neumann College, we had a different view. We wanted to form a partnership that consisted of members from the professional business community, our faculty, and students. Through our interaction with members of the business community on our Business Advisory Council, we came to realize that a need for this type of partnership was necessary at Neumann College.

Our case study describes how the small business community became involved in a collaborative effort with academia and why. How both the students and the business community benefited from the experience, and how students, college administrators, faculty, and the business community perceived the experience.

We will discuss how the business community involvement improved the learning environment for both traditional college students and members of the work force. We will also discuss how the traditional age student learned from the experienced business person while the non traditional student gained insights into business from a different perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, Neumann College established a Business Advisory Council. Under the College's continued sponsorship, the Council's goal is to help students in the business majors become better prepared for the constantly changing business world. Hopefully, as well rounded professionals, they can be strong contributors to their business community. In addition, the Council is instrumental in helping Neumann College increase its visibility in the business community and improve public relations in the business world as well as the community in general.

The primary role of the Business Advisory Council is to provide business experience, contact, and perspective to the ongoing development of the Business Division. Other roles are to promote faculty research, and identify educational needs in the business world. The Council meets four times a year. Sub committees are often formed to work on special projects.

At Neumann College a close relationship already existed between business and education. The members of our Business Advisory Council were already instrumental in upgrading the learning process and preparing students with the skills needed for various business careers. They

accomplished this through internships, cooperative education positions, a mentor program and participation in our annual business exchange. The Council consists of community-based business leaders who try to meld their needs with those of the business division. What became important during our project was to meld the ideas of the business division with those of the business community. Both members of Council and faculty recognized that Business is the major beneficiary of a solid, effective education system. "Business leaders see an immediate need for highly trained workers who can adapt to today's ever-changing technology. Often, they do not see such people emerging from the education system." (*Sharp and Sharp*).

Over the past several years the members of the Business Advisory Council worked with the business division at Neumann College to help bring new ideas and insights from the small business community to our student population. One proposal from the Council members entailed creating a Center for Entrepreneurs at Neumann College. They envisioned this center as a very active advocate for the small business community. Unfortunately, our attorneys felt that this might interfere with our remaining a charitable institution under the Internal Revenue Service guidelines. We did not want to jeopardize our tax exempt status in any way, so we voted down the idea. This unsuccessful attempt to bridge the gap between the Business Community and Neumann College dismayed the Business Advisory Council. An important lesson which we learned from this experience was the importance of moving quickly.

As many of us know, in academia the wheels turn very slowly. This was something that the members of the Business Advisory Council were not accustomed to and were very disillusioned by which was a concern to us. We valued their ideas and felt their disappointment and impatience. One of our council members, Stephen Markowitz, said "In dealing with our 5,000 company members I found a great deal of distrust and dislike for academia. The academic community in some cases is perceived by entrepreneurs as irrelevant, pedantic, and elitist. Those academic institutions that had partnered with government agencies such as SBA, SCORE, SBDC etc., were seen as insensitive to the needs and practical limits that are imposed on the small business community relative to education." Mr. Markowitz's comments somewhat paralleled those of Howard J. Morgnes, Proctor and Gamble's former Chairman of the Board. Mr. Morgens said in a February 10, 1973 speech at Washington University that "everyone who is interested in rational progress will agree that there is a real need today for people in business and people in our universities to understand each other. Business and education are quite often antagonistic. Yet, to a considerable degree, each is dependent on the other."

ANALYSIS

We recognized the need to bridge the gap between academia and the small business community. On one side we were entrusted with the task to prepare the next generation of business leaders and on the other side we were faced with the knowledge that "entrepreneurs perceived the academic community as irrelevant, pedantic and elitist." (Stephen Markowitz). After several lengthy meetings with our Advisory Council, we concluded that, in their opinion, business students in general were only text book oriented and not familiar with the "real world" workings of business. We realized that one way to bridge this gap was to bring the students to the business community so that they could gain an understanding of what was expected of them before they graduated. We believed

that we could accomplish this through curriculum development. Thus, the business-education partnership was formed. Our first step was to form a subcommittee to study what we could do to bring the academic community and business community together.

DIFFICULTIES

The business development subcommittee met several times during the summer of 1995 and developed a Curriculum Proposal. At first, the committee thought that it would take several months before we began to see the results of our efforts. Our committee was very concerned that our work would be delayed being well aware of how slow academia sometimes moves toward change. Naturally, we were delighted when our committee completed the proposal in a very short period and it was quickly passed through the curriculum committee. This was the first major step toward removing the gap between business and academia. The business community recognized that we were listening to what they identified as problems and that we responded very quickly to implement a solution.

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

Curriculum development is usually an on going process at any college or university. What made our offering of a *Certificate in Small Business* unique was due to the involvement we solicited from the small business community. We worked closely with the Business Advisory Council who have expertise and insights into the needs of the small business community. The collaborative effort between business leaders and academia proved to be a successful undertaking when we offered the first course in a series of nine courses in the Spring of 1995.

The program entails taking nine (one) credit courses (Appendix 1). Each course is offered over a five-week period meeting once a week. The unique feature surrounding each course is that the principal lecturer is a credentialed business leader who utilizes successful members of the business community as guest speakers. Another unique feature is the opportunity to bring together in a learning environment both traditional college students and members of the work force who have started their own business or plan to start a small business or who manage a small business. The traditional student is able to learn from the business leader and at the same time the business person is gaining insight into their business from the student's perspective.

The nine courses are structured so that a student may take selective courses as the need fits or can take the entire nine courses and earn the certificate. Courses are offered continuously and the entire program can be completed within one year.

Development of each course is primarily completed by the instructor who in most cases is a professional in a particular field. The instructor brings a more practical viewpoint of the subject from "real world" experience to the classroom as opposed to a traditional academic who may solely rely on textbooks. We found that in all cases the students rated the practical knowledge of a topic as presented by the business professional having "hands on" experience very useful and beneficial.

STUDENT PROFILE

We found the students who registered for the program to be a very diverse group. The students included:

- traditional business students who recently graduated from Neumann College and returned to Neumann to earn the Certificate in Small Business.
- current business students working toward the Certificate and using the credits as electives to satisfy graduation requirements.
- business owners who had operated a small business for many years but are looking to broaden their business knowledge.
- entrepreneurs who were planning to start a business.
- members of the work force being downsized who were exploring alternative business opportunities.

STUDENT COMMENTS AND EVALUATIONS

Students overwhelmingly commented on the benefits of having instructors who had recent practical experience in a particular field. Students felt they could question the instructors who were; attorneys, accountants, managers, credit lenders, advertising specialists and receive examples of what was going on in the “real world.” The students thought that the cases which were used by the instructors were more relevant to the subject matter. They felt the material presented was in line with what they would face when they encountered various situations in business. Also, students liked the idea that each course did not require a textbook. They felt that the hand outs prepared by the instructor reflected current issues.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNITY COMMENTS

The entrepreneurial community in general felt that connecting “classrooms and life” was an ideal way to bridge the gap between academia and business. They viewed the use of community-based leaders as the primary educators in the classroom instrumental in closing the gap. They saw the use of facilitators to help students gain knowledge and insights into small business as opposed to faculty teaching theories from textbooks as very beneficial.

ADMINISTRATION COMMENTS

The involvement of the business community in the process of educating and preparing our students was considered a positive move in developing the next generation of business leaders. The faculty and administrators were already aware of the disappointment experienced by the business

community with the college prepared business students and their lack of “real world” business exposure. They perceived our efforts in offering the Certificate in Small Business as a way to correct what the business community felt was “lacking in the education of the next generation of business leaders.”

IMPROVEMENTS

After offering the program for one full year, we were able to incorporate several changes based on the feedback that we received from our students, the Business Advisory Council, instructors, and faculty moderators. Some major changes were:

- 1) We initiated an advertising campaign to better promote the program. We called local newspapers and asked them to interview the instructor for each module before it began. The local newspapers were agreeable since the person they would be interviewing was usually someone recognized in the community.
- 2) Originally we offered each module over a five week period. Since many classes comprised adult students with business commitments, we changed the offering to a four week period and extended each meeting by fifteen minutes.
- 3) Several students had a problem with summer offerings. The feedback that we received indicated that students were strongly against summer courses. We rescheduled the offerings so that we completely dropped the summer courses. The offerings now begin each Fall and run to the end of the Spring semester.
- 4) Our program consisted of ten topics. We consolidated one topic and dropped the program requirements to nine courses.
- 5) Several topics were reworked after we received feedback from the students. Some material was considered too technical and deleted. We expanded on other material.

CONCLUSION

Presently, it is Neumann College’s intention to run the program again for another year. We believe the program is beneficial to our students as well as to the business community. Our business faculty will continue to improve the program. We will of course depend on the honest and constructive feedback from our students, business leaders, instructors, guest speakers, and Partnership Council.

Based on our first year of experience we have found the program to be very rewarding to the students as well as to those involved from its inception. I would strongly recommend that every school establish a Partnership Council. This will provide an excellent opportunity for your business students as well as for your business faculty. The cost is minimal but the rewards are high.

REFERENCES

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Appendix A

PROGRAM INFORMATION

The *Small Business Certificate Program* is sponsored by the Division of Business and Information Management. The division developed this program after input from the Business Advisory Council.

The program will provide practical education in small business to owners, managers, and potential entrepreneurs.

The program consists of nine one-credit courses. Courses may be taken in any order and there are no prerequisites for admission. Participants may select any course that meets their needs or take all nine courses and earn the *Certificate in Small Business*. Participants can earn the certificate within one year.

COURSE CONTENT1. *Starting a Small Business*

Do you have what it takes to start your own business? Explore what it takes to start your own business or improve one that is ongoing.

Topics:

Start a business from scratch - Check sourcing opportunities - Buy an existing business or a franchise - Examine entrepreneurial traits - Build a distributorship - Review regulations - Work a home-based operation - Look at future trends to prevent failure.

2. *Planning and Developing*

Want to be successful in your business? Then set objectives and a business plan to accomplish them.

Topics:

Understand your mission - Select sites (home based or outside) - Develop goals - Design appropriate organization - Compile data - Do estate planning - Write business plans - Control growth

3. *Marketing, Advertising and Managing Customer Relations*

Interested in continuing growth and business health? Master the basics of marketing, advertising, promotion and customer relations and retention.

Topics:

Develop bids, estimates and proposals - Evaluate costs and set budgets - Work at market planning and research - Determine pricing, servicing and set up an advertising program - Image - Obtaining proper exposure - Build customer relations - Identify customer needs.

4. *Managing Legal Environment and Following Good Business Ethics*

Determined to "keep things legal?" Study legal forms of business, tax implications and insurance requirements. Also, review current issues about social, ethical and environmental responsibilities.

Topics:

Study various forms of ownership - Determine insurance needs - Inspect articles of incorporation and filings - Review product and professional liability - Investigate details of contracts - See shareholder and partnership agreements - Build customer and product responsibility - Set social and ethical requirements.

5. *Securing Financing*

Need capital? Explore various ways to finance start-ups, continuing operations and growth.

Topics:

Obtain venture capital - Clear your credit history - Use government funding and subsidies - Build supplier credit - Try bartering - Listen to bank requirements for a loan - Apply for minority programs - Explore family sources of funds.

6. *Working with Employees and Other Essential People*

Need to manage people to run your business? Get some help in selecting, managing and developing employees.

Topics:

Learn basics of hiring and firing - Use fair and motivating compensation - Build skills training programs - Explore alternative forms of staffing - Plan for succession - Work with consultants - Evaluate performance - Control subcontractors.

7. *Understanding Accounting and Finances*

Bewildered by some terms and investment requirements? Get some help in learning the basics and some guidance in alternatives.

Topics:

Review profit/loss and balance sheets - Develop credit evaluation - Practice some budgeting - Explore audits, reviews and measure cash flow compilations - Control inventory, receivables and payables - Review taxes payroll to income - Examine accounting software packages.

8. *Using the Computer*

Determined to use this tool in making your business better? Look at many facets of equipment and programs.

Topics:

Determine your needs - Make your own graphics (desktop) - Identify basic terms - Set up a local area network (LAN) - Explore available hardware and software Use Internet - Practice in our computer lab Interface with computer contractors.

9. *Growing Your Business*

Anxious to plan for the future and manage change? Explore ways to grow your business,

Topics:

Explore the twists of the industry that led you to your present situation - Find new markets - Tap into data collection banks - Manage change and growth - Explore developing trends in your business - See if you want to go public - Expand your market Learn how to sell your business

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