

## DEVELOPING A FRESHMAN SEMINAR: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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When the announcement was made that Montana State University (MSU) was switching from quarters to semesters, the College of Business (COB) faculty had the opportunity to reexamine and reconfigure the curriculum. One of the results of that reassessment was the development and implementation of the freshman seminar Management (Mgmt) 101 to address issues of retention, student outcome assessment, and faculty development. Having completed its 3rd year, the course has exceeded expectations.

Relatively little has been written about freshman business courses (a notable exception is Miller, 1991), but there is a considerable body of literature on the freshman seminar (e.g., Banning, 1989; Cuseo, 1991; Fidler & Fidler, 1991; Gardner, 1989; Noel & Levitz, 1989). Much of the research on freshman seminars has been performed by the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience at the University of South Carolina (Cuseo, 1991). Fidler and Fidler (1991) surveyed 2- and 4-year colleges in the United States and found that most freshman seminar courses are currently orientation seminars and are focused on the following course content areas: academic planning, library skills, value of college, study skills, managing test anxiety, reading, career planning, general orientation to health education problems, general orientation to campus, and stress management. The COB had taught

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a one-credit freshman orientation course for 12 years and MSU had just implemented a freshman seminar in the general studies program, both following this pattern. The COB chose to retain many of the attributes of this model yet also address the content and skills its students would need to be successful in their professional courses and in their future careers in business.

New American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 1993) accreditation standards were established in 1991 and provided some of the direction needed for the course:

The processes used to strengthen curricula, develop faculty, improve instruction, and enhance intellectual activity determine the direction and rate of improvement. Thus, these processes play an important role in accreditation, along with the necessary review of inputs and assessment of outcomes. As part of each school's effort to prepare its students for future careers, the school should provide a total educational experience that emphasizes conceptual reasoning, problem-solving skills, and preparation for life-long learning. (pp. 1-2)

In keeping with these standards and incorporating effective elements of other freshman seminars, Mgmt 101 was designed to address a number of organizational and personal goals:

- To facilitate students' understanding of the goals and objectives of higher education, including their appreciation and understanding of the liberal arts requirements that currently total about half of their business degree requirements;
- To establish the connection between the student and the institution; to make students experientially aware of the organizational culture of the COB.
- To engage students in self-reflection relative to their development both as successful stakeholders in the COB/MSU as well as in their subsequent professions.

Each of these goals is grounded on the principle that retention, persistence, and success in the academic enterprise enhances the probability that students will develop as reflective, liberally educated professionals. In designing the course, faculty worked to create an environment of learning that promoted the match between individual and institutional commitments and decreased the probability of attrition (Tinto, 1987).

### **Needs Assessment**

The decision to integrate a freshman seminar into the curriculum was based primarily on the nature and needs of MSU students and the nature

and mission of the COB. The COB is a relatively small (1,000 students), undergraduate-only, AACSB-accredited business college. As is typical of colleges of business accredited by the AACSB, students spend the majority of their first 2 years completing their university core curriculum because their professional course work is generally restricted to the upper division. In other words, students could conceivably major in business and not take a business course until their third semester of enrollment. Retention data has clearly supported that students need to make meaningful connections with their college in the first 6 weeks of matriculation (Noel & Levitz, 1989).

This gap between students and their college is also exacerbated by the nature and needs of MSU students. Most students (85%) come from Montana high schools. When they arrive at MSU, they have joined a community that, with its approximately 10,000 students, is the seventh-largest community in the state. Over 50% of these students have graduated from high schools of less than 100 total students; it is not unusual for a student to come from a graduating class of less than 20 students. Students frequently are overwhelmed by their 1st-year experience and nearly 30% of them do not return for their sophomore year. Although this attrition rate is not unusual for a large state public institution (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985), it provided a clear signal that students were not making those vital 1st-year connections.

### Course Development

Decisions on content were guided by input from a team consisting of faculty, administration, business practitioners, and a student development specialist. This team found that upper-division students were having difficulty understanding the connections between themselves and business, between themselves and the organizational culture of the COB, and most important, between themselves and the expectations of the professional world. In designing the course, the faculty struggled with concrete ways to develop these missing links. The stakeholder model of organizations provided such a vehicle. Mgmt 101 is designed as a learning organization in which students, faculty, and the institution are primary stakeholders. An example stakeholder map for the Mgmt 101 course appears as Figure 1.

The stakeholder model also provided a means to draw students' attention to the fact that business is not conducted in a vacuum but is part of an ecological system impacted by economic, social, political, environmental, legal, and ethical decisions. Students were encouraged to explore the ecology of business as an interactive enterprise that requires understanding of the content and processes of a liberal education. An outcome of this effort was

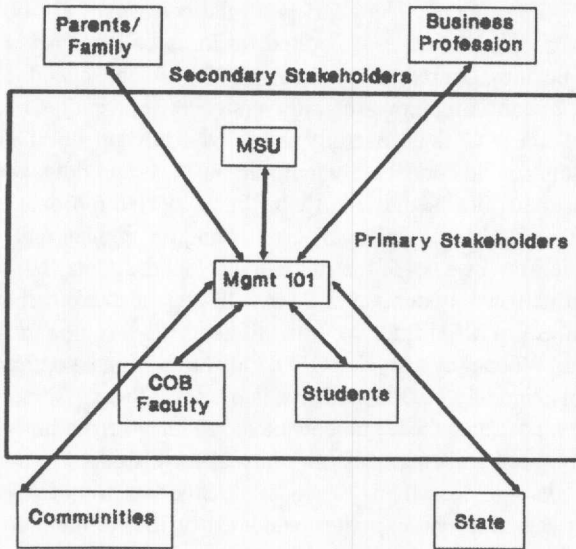


Figure 1: Stakeholder Map for Management 101 Course

that students began to select university core courses that would have relevance to their personal career plans.

Another way students were encouraged to connect with the COB was to use the "language of business" in the course. Feedback from the initial students in the course and from faculty who taught upper-division courses was clear: Undergraduate students are not well versed in the language of business, which is not only the language of the professional world but also the language of the organizational culture of the college. For example, students had difficulty with the terminology of basic business communication; many had never seen a memo, much less written or received one. They struggled with annual report analysis and strategic planning exercises. They were particularly unaware of current professional literature and were not comfortable working in teams.

First, course designers explored ways to enhance students' educational and professional success by familiarizing them with the language of business at the very beginning of their college experience and in doing so helped establish their roles as stakeholders in the academic organization. Examples of the integration of the language of business into Mgmt 101 are as follows:

ments also required them to work as teams, which promoted their time management, leadership, conflict resolution, and motivational skills.

To improve their knowledge base, students were asked to focus on both knowledge about the COB and knowledge about the ecology of business. In the organizational area students were required to acquaint themselves with the curricular requirements and standards of their majors and to identify the college personnel and campus resources available to assist them (e.g., advisers, student activities, etc). In the content area students were expected to be well prepared for class discussions and to support their points and arguments with course readings and presentations. Although expressing individual opinions was a vital part of discussion, students were expected to integrate and synthesize the course materials into their arguments.

### Course Design

Mgmt 101 is a graded, three-semester-hour course. To achieve both the efficiency of a large lecture format (particularly when hosting several external speakers) and the effectiveness of a seminar for building teams and developing communication and interpersonal skills, the class meets every Monday in one large group of 250 students and then twice more during the week in seminar sections of no more than 20 students. Each seminar section is assigned two associates: a faculty member and an upper-division student. They jointly have the responsibility for leading discussions about speakers and readings and for monitoring student progress in skill development. The arrangement also provides leadership and team-building experience for promising senior students. Faculty teaching junior classes help in the recruiting of the next year's student associates. If any students wish to formalize the experience and earn credit while an associate, they enroll in a course entitled "Business Tutorial" and integrate their study of leadership, mentoring, meeting management, and assessment with current literature in those areas.

Identifying readings and activities that encourage students to develop a "big picture" of business and the ways in which business interacts with a number of other activities (e.g., social, legal, economic, natural and political environment) was a challenging task. The 1st year this course was taught it was discovered that dividing material topically encouraged students to compartmentalize the knowledge and not integrate it into a larger, more holistic, framework. In an attempt to counteract this tendency to treat knowledge as discrete, course content was restructured and was focused on the "ecology" of business (Banning, 1989). Readings and classroom discussions encouraged students to examine ways in which the college operates as a subsystem

of the larger institution, how the business curriculum interacts with the demands of the professional world, and, most important, ways to increase the fit between students' commitments and expectations and the mission of the COB. This broadened students' perceptions of how business is conducted and how their studies in the COB help to prepare them for the challenges of the business profession.

Subsequent to identifying a central core to the course, readings were selected that were intellectually challenging as well as current and relevant to the business environment. Some of the readings previously used in the course include Brown (1992), Burgess (1993), Halberstam (1992), Lewis (1989), Nakane (1970), Preston (1991), Rhodes (1989), Strasser and Becklund (1993), and Thurow (1993). Readings selected for the fall semester of 1994 were:

- *Sam Walton: Made in America: My Story* by Walton and Huey (1993), which provided a familiar context for the discussion of business strategy and the challenges of a business career.
- *The Audience, the Message and the Speaker* by Hasling (1993) and *Starting Your New Business* by Martin (1992) are references that students used to complete assigned tasks during the course.
- *Schindler's List* by Keneally (1993) was used to facilitate discussion of the role of ethics in business. The book stresses business issues and decisions to a much greater extent than the recent motion picture.
- *Wal-Mart Annual Report 1994* provided background information about Wal-Mart™ in conjunction with Walton and Huey (1993) and assisted students' understanding of how to assimilate information from corporate reports.

Students were also required to subscribe to *Business Week*.

Guest speakers during Monday lectures addressed topics that were integrated into that week's seminar discussions. At each Monday lecture, students were handed a memo that directed them to discuss their personal reactions to the lecture presentation in memo form to their seminar associates. This writing assignment helped students form a personal connection with the business world through self-reflection while providing numerous opportunities to develop critical thinking and writing skills.

Students were also required to participate in several extramural activities that reinforced the objectives of the course. For example, students participated in a community service project that provided them with the opportunity to experience the nonprofit side of the economy and to reflect on the philanthropic role of individual citizens and business in general.

One major learning activity that synthesizes much of the course content is the Franchise Project. Students work in teams to write a simple business

plan for a franchise. Students choose a franchise, estimate the feasibility of bringing the franchise to this area, and make a presentation to potential investors (their classmates) that recommends whether investors should or should not invest. For most freshmen this is their first opportunity to do market-feasibility assessment, financial analysis, site analysis, and strategic planning. The students learn some of the real costs of doing business, they come to appreciate the breadth of knowledge business professionals must possess, they better understand the nature of a free market economy, and they learn a lot about how work teams function.

Because freshmen students typically lack the content knowledge necessary to complete this task unassisted, a system of resources is provided to allow them to be successful without being overwhelmed in the process. Two Monday "primer" sessions are scheduled in marketing and finance, which whet students' appetites for further study in these areas while providing enough nuts and bolts to let students accomplish the assigned task. A resource fair is also held during a Monday lecture when local business-assistance professionals, bankers, realtors, city regulatory officials, and outstanding entrepreneurs provide counsel and assistance. Volunteer faculty also provide direct assistance on a consultant basis. Despite their lack of formal business training, many teams create very realistic and high quality franchise business plans.

As a way of personalizing the content and process of the course and as a way of acquainting students with curricular issues, each student was asked to develop a personal strategic plan. Students were asked to formulate the following: a mission/goal statement that reflected the type of student they wished to become; an academic plan that included a rationale for course choices; strategies for overcoming barriers; and an evaluation mechanism. Students were encouraged to make the plan an integral part of their advising portfolio.

### **Student Development and Assessment**

In addition to the content objectives of the course, connections between the student and the institution/college were actively developed. Students were asked to reflect upon their role as contributing stakeholders of the COB and to enhance their organizational effectiveness by taking the initiative to inform themselves about the college and the institution. Because the development of a student/mentor relationship has been cited as one of the primary factors contributing to retention and academic success (Noel & Levitz, 1985), students were, by virtue of the small seminar sections, given the opportunity

to establish a close relationship with a small group of peers, an upper-class student, and a faculty member of the COB. Students in each seminar section exchanged phone numbers and many formed study groups to study for other classes. For example, in one section a student who is particularly good at accounting volunteered to tutor her classmates who were having trouble in that class. Seminar section associates were also encouraged to meet with students outside of class. It was not uncommon for faculty to have their students visit their homes or meet at local pizza parlors during class time or in the evenings. Student associates also interacted with students outside of class, often taking students to business club activities to meet other upper-division students.

To better predict the academic and professional success of students in the realm of personal initiative and problem solving, the college gathered data on two measures that have been correlated to success. The first was used during the initial year of the course to measure the immediate, short-term impact of the freshman seminar utilizing a measure of *locus of control* (Levenson, 1981). Students in the seminar and a control group of freshmen not enrolled in the seminar were pre- and posttested to determine if there were any significant differences in relation to students' feelings and perceptions of "being in charge" of their education and lives. Significant changes were found in the internal-control dimension: Freshman seminar students felt significantly more in control of their decisions and environment at the end of the course.

The second measure focused on the long-range impact of the college experience on students' cognitive development. Students were given the Learning Environment Preferences (LEP) questionnaire, an objective instrument designed to place students on the Perry Scale of Epistemological Development (see Appendix C) (Moore, 1987). LEP data continues to be tracked and will be used in a longitudinal study of student development. Students who completed the course will be reassessed when they enroll in the senior capstone course to determine if any significant movement has occurred in their epistemological maturity.

### **Faculty and Student Associate Development**

A vital part of the course involved the development of a critical mass of faculty who taught and supported the course. This involvement was promoted a number of ways. First, in developing the objectives and activities for the course, the organizational culture and norms for the COB had to be clearly stated. A faculty team identified the values, skills, and knowledge base that



best facilitated success in the college and eventually in the workplace. This exercise required faculty to clarify the COB culture and mission and to internalize it into their own teaching.

Second, to sustain the faculty commitment to the course, the faculty team (usually 10 faculty members in fall semester and 6 in spring semester) participates, along with the student associates, in a yearly training retreat as well as weekly meetings. The retreat is held shortly before the beginning of each semester and is devoted to a number of activities, which include associate team-building exercises, practice in discussion techniques, assignment norming, and general discussion of the course.

The weekly meetings focus on what is happening in the seminar sections, planning specifics of the week's tasks, norming cross-section grading of assignments and presentations, debriefing the presentations of guest speakers, and sharing experiences and perceptions. These weekly meetings have promoted a great deal of consistency among the seminar sections as well as collegiality among associates.

Third, teaching faculty are given feedback from a number of sources. Students complete a midterm and a semester-end evaluation of the course. The focus of these evaluations is developmental and numerous student suggestions have been implemented. Each section is also visited by one of the course coordinators, a member of the faculty, and a student development professional staff member, and individual feedback is given to associates with particular focus on discussion-leading skills. For many of the faculty who serve as associates, this is the first time they have had peers observe their teaching and the process has contributed to collegiality among the faculty.

Fourth, faculty have the opportunity to work with students as colleagues. Upper-division students apply to become associates and are selected based on grades and interests. Students are active coteachers. They lead class discussions, jointly grade all papers and presentations, and attend the weekly associate meetings. The student associates play a key role in helping the students develop their personal strategic plans. Each student associate meets individually with each student in his or her section to help develop objectives and plans of action. Student and faculty associates meet at least weekly to plan their class activities and discuss the grading of various assignments. Many faculty have been able to share in the excitement of the student associates as they lead a class for the very first time. Faculty have also been impressed by the fresh insight that these student associates have offered during the weekly meetings. For the traditional-age undergraduate student, the associate can also serve as a cultural facilitator between the language and values of the faculty member and those of a young adult.

Instructor meetings also have become a major mechanism for faculty development and instructional-skills development throughout the college. Faculty examined their expectations of students and engaged in creative pedagogical solutions to integrating students into the COB environment. The result of the planning and implementation of Mgmt 101 was not only the delivery of an excellent course but the development of a critical mass of faculty who value and support each others' teaching. They ultimately designed a course that was uniquely their own, not simply an adoption of an existing model. The ownership they feel in the freshmen seminar is gradually being reflected in their examination of the college's curriculum as a whole.

## Conclusion

After 3 years of development and intense work, positive results are being seen with students, faculty, and student associates. In the short term, there are more satisfied students who have expressed a connection to the college and have performed better academically. In the final evaluation of the course, a majority of students were saying that "this is the best course" they have ever had, that they "look forward to taking other courses like it in their major" and that the course helped them connect to their major and to the faculty of the college. There was also a marked drop in the number of 1st-year students who are suspended from school. At the end of spring term 1992, the COB suspended approximately 30 students. Of those only four had participated in Mgmt 101 and each had earned less than a C grade in the course.

Second, Mgmt 101 has been very successful in building students' oral and written communication skills. An indication of the quality of skill development occurred 2 years ago when MSU's Core Curriculum Committee, which oversees the university's general education requirements, identified the freshman seminar as an alternative to the university's verbal core course, Introduction to Public Communication.

Third, implementing this course should not be seen as a way to greatly increase enrollments. Although some students do switch to a business major after taking this course, others decide that business is not for them. COB faculty believe it is best for students to find out early that business is not an appropriate major. The students who do change to another major frequently pursue a business minor.

Fourth, the benefits of participating as a student associate are numerous for our upper-division students. Several have discovered they really enjoy teaching and are now considering an academic career. Student associates have developed a deeper appreciation for the actual amount of time and effort that

go into teaching a course. References from their faculty associates are much more meaningful to potential employers and graduate schools. Student associates can really see what progress they have made as individuals in terms of both intellectual and emotional development.

In the long term, faculty are beginning to experience having students who have taken the freshmen seminar in upper-division courses. Efforts are underway to assess whether they are better able to integrate the specialized, professional knowledge base of their upper-division business professional courses with the "big picture" of the ecology of business introduced in the freshman seminar. Persistence and levels of commitment to the college as they progress toward their degrees are also being monitored.

With regard to the faculty, some notions about learning and teaching are being challenged. Some senior faculty have held the cynical view that students are reluctant players in the classroom and must be intimidated into performance or culled out if they do not meet "professional" standards. The very high expectations of the freshman seminar as well as the intense collegial experience among the freshman seminar associates appear to have challenged these assumptions. The course represents a powerful developmental tool for faculty and a powerful learning experience for students.

Developing the freshman seminar provided a number of opportunities to continuously improve instruction and to promote conditions for student success. Experience in Mgmt 101 has demonstrated that a freshman course can be academically and professionally challenging yet still meet the objectives of integrating students into the academic organization and promoting their success in that organization.

**Appendix A**  
**Mission and Vision Statement**  
**Management 101 Strategic Plan**  
**(from the course policy and procedures manual)**

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**Mission Statement**

This course begins your academic preparation for a successful experience in higher education. You will be part of a dialogue that includes students, seminar associates, and business practitioners and uses the literature of business to confront issues facing business today. The purpose of this dialogue will be to explore how managers can achieve the long-term sustainability of their organization by inter-

acting effectively with the internal and external stakeholder groups that make up the "ecology of business."

### **Vision Statement**

Our goal is to be a dynamic learning organization. Students and seminar associates together will confront issues facing business today and will identify the characteristics that business professionals must possess to effectively deal with those issues.

- We will work to develop a realistic awareness of the present and future environment of business—global, economic, political, cultural, and ethical—and provide you with opportunities to develop academically and personally.
- In the course, we are committed to upholding the principles of scholarly inquiry and creative problem solving. We encourage an environment where diversity in values and perceptions is shared in a supportive climate.
- We envision this course as your first experience in what will be a lifelong self-directed learning process. The content of the course is business, and it should provide a rich insight into the exciting intellectual challenges of the academic field of business.
- We encourage students to develop connections with the college, the university, and the community such as with academic advisers, faculty, student organizations, libraries, business professionals, and public service organizations.

## **Appendix B Strategic Goals Management 101 Strategic Plan (from the course policy and procedures manual)**

### **Strategic Goals**

To understand the diversity of values of higher education and of business and to have the opportunity to challenge and clarify your own value system and code of ethics:

- Values of higher education: Tolerance of diversity and ambiguity, encouragement of cooperative scholarship, demand for individual initiative and responsibility, and development of professional expectations and standards.

*(continued)*

- Values of business: Promotion of professional ethics, sustainability of operations, responsibilities to community and society, and attributes of the free-market system.
- Personal values: Understand and operationalize your own personal values in a professional context.

To develop skills necessary for making contributions to organizational effectiveness:

#### **Individual Contributions**

- Critical and creative thinking
- Analysis and reasoning
- Communication: writing, speaking, and listening
- Planning
- Problem solving
- Self-motivation

#### **Team Contributions**

- Leadership process
- Conflict resolution
- Team building
- Team motivation

To acquire an initial knowledge base necessary for success in business and college:

#### **University Related**

- Majors
- Curricular requirements
- Available campus resources

#### **Career Related**

- Language of business: concepts and models
  - Market forces
  - Sustainability
  - Economic systems
  - Ecology of business: cultural heritage and diversity, politics, value conflicts
-

## Appendix C

### Perry Scale of Epistemological Development

|              | Role of Knowledge and Learning  | Role of Instructor (authority)  | Role of Peers   | Classroom Atmosphere   | Role of Evaluation   |
|--------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| Dualism      | Focus on WHAT to learn, RIGHT major, and RIGHT answers  | Sources of information are textbooks and instructor (who is responsible for student learning)       | Friends but never sources of information, teacher is final authority          | Structured, traditional environment, lecture and passive learning                      | Straight forward, "just the facts," fairness and effort are factors, traditional testing             |
| Multiplicity | Focus on HOW to learn, opinions/perspectives become more important than FACTS   | Instructor is model for HOW to think, students seek independence from and often challenge authority | Peers are legitimate sources of information/perspectives                      | Enjoys group work and greater student responsibility                                   | Instructor's right to evaluate is challenged, qualitative criteria are seen as legitimate            |
| Relativism   | Focus on learning for learning's sake, knowledge judged on the "preponderance of evidence," criteria-based ethical thinking | Instructor (source of expertise) is mutually involved in decision making and learning               | Peers are engaged in mutual search for knowledge and valued members of a team | Endorsement of seminar format, values intellectual dialogue and performance critiquing | Separation of evaluation of performance from evaluation of self, criteria-based critiques are valued |

SOURCE: Adapted from *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, by W. G. Perry, Jr., 1970, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

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