

RETHINKING BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Build the mission statement within the context of the university mission statement. **P**erspective requested that I report on problems we have faced in planning for the transition to a baccalaureate program, as well as the manner in which we have solved these problems, with the hope that other departments on campus might learn from our experiences.

In this report, I will review five process-oriented suggestions we would offer to any department preparing a baccalaureate program, sharing our particular efforts as examples. Following that review, I will explore three decision points or challenges you may face in planning and execution, explaining how we handled these challenges. The advice we pass on may or may not apply in your particular situation, but it can serve as one more input for you in your decision process.

FIVE STEPS

1. *Create a concise departmental mission statement*—In developing the statement, let it reflect the key reasons your program has been chosen for baccalaureate status. Your mission statement should address two topics in a broad but concise manner: a) What is your purpose? b) How will you go about accomplishing that purpose? Build the mission statement within the context of the university mission statement. Your departmental statement should complement the university mission, but need not be redundant—focus on the unique mission of your department within the university. Here is our mission statement as prepared for the prospectus:

- The mission of the Business Management Department is to create a learning environment for students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to make an immediate contribution in the work place, and to rapidly grow into leadership positions in their organizations.
- We will do this by partnering with industry and non-profit organizations to provide mentoring, seminars, consulting projects, and internships to allow the students to apply what they have learned via case study and classroom discussion.

2. *Make a list of desired outcomes*—These outcomes, if accomplished, will deliver the mission by addressing these questions: a) What must our students be able to do? b) What do our students need to know to be able to do these things? Here are our desired outcomes as originally developed for the prospectus. In some cases, we include strategies for accomplishing the outcomes:

- Technological Literacy: Graduates will understand how technology is used in all functions of business to improve productivity, communication, and customer service.
- Global Literacy: All graduates will understand international trade and financial systems. Core courses in marketing and organizational behavior will address cross-cultural issues.
- Quantitative Analysis: All appropriate upper-division courses will develop quantitative reasoning skills by utilizing business software and web-based applications to solve finance, marketing, and operational problems addressed in the curriculum.
- Problem Solving and Project Management: All upper-division students will participate in business case studies, internships, and consulting projects to develop skills in these areas.
- Written and Oral Communication: Students will complete three writing courses, a public speaking course, and will utilize presentations software in upper division oral reports.
- Teamwork and Leadership Skills: The Organizational Behavior course will teach team-building principles, to be applied in study groups during the integrated junior core. Selected emphasis courses will include consulting projects executed in teams.
- Entrepreneurial Spirit: Students will be educated, encouraged, and supported in operating and growing business ventures in appropriate courses, guest seminars, practicums, and internships. Interested students will have the opportunity to promote entrepreneurship internationally via service internships.

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3. *Use the mission and outcomes as standards*—In all your curriculum planning, staffing decisions, professional development efforts and teaching methodology explorations, refer back to your mission statement and desired outcomes again and again, and let them be your guide.

Elements of the mission statement and the outcomes list have proved very helpful in later decisions. For example, the mission statement phrases “learning environment,” “experiences,” and “to apply what they have learned” helped us come to the conclusion that an experience-based integrated business core was the best way for us to proceed with our juniors. The desired outcomes—problem-solving skills, project management skills, teamwork and communication skills, and entrepreneurial spirit—reinforced this decision.

The mission statement and outcomes are helping us in curriculum development as we attempt to utilize business partnerships to the level and extent appropriate for each course, and they help us focus content

on desired outcomes rather than on traditional content. The mission statement also helps us stay focused on our main goal of career preparation rather than graduate school preparation. The leadership phrase in the mission statement helps remind us to keep our curriculum broad enough that a student can understand all aspects of a business and work with people of differing backgrounds.

4. *Seek input and feedback from co-workers, customers, consumers, suppliers, consultants, competitors and the Comforter*—Many an improvement has been made in our plan because one of our department faculty came to me with an new idea or a concern about the current plan. We have in our department a diverse mix of talent. Each one contributes in different ways. Some are strategic thinkers, others pragmatists; still others play the key role of being highly supportive and providing encouragement.

We consider our students to be our customers—they are buying a service from us—so we run our programs by them to gauge their response. We consider the employers to be consumers of our finished product, the graduate, so we seek feedback from dozens of businesses on curriculum decisions. Our suppliers, the text providers, professional journals, trade publications, seminar providers, etc. can let us know of new developments in the field. Consultants, i.e. visiting professors or friendly mentors at other institutions, can see the forest when we sometimes have our nose against a tree. Our competitors, other successful university programs in or out of our discipline, can offer us insights on what it takes to be successful. Finally, the Comforter can confirm the validity or truth of any piece of input received. Ignoring any of these sources, you may miss a catalyst for a better approach to learning.

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5. *Don't be afraid to change plans as new information or learning takes place*—President Bednar reminded me at one point in our process to “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). This suggests that only after a thorough review of multiple options can we feel good about proceeding in a given direction. Some ideas require actual testing before we can know if they should be adopted; others can be accepted or discarded after careful review against the mission and desired outcomes of the department.

We shared our interim plans with our prospective students and measured their response. We later made changes to our plans after receiving feedback from many of our constituencies. It was not a sign of confusion or misdirection when we changed plans, it was a sign of continued improvement. Most of us learn line upon line; we can't comprehend all truth in one great endowment.

THREE DECISIONS AND HOW WE RESOLVED THEM

Decision #1: Breadth and depth of the major—BYU-Provo has one Business Management major but offered (last fall) 10-12 different areas of emphasis. Boise State offers separate majors in Marketing, Finance, Management, Operations and International Business. What should we do?

Our mission statement helped us with two things. We knew that we needed to prepare our students to make an immediate impact on an organization, so whatever programs we did have, they must be deep enough to provide some hard skills. Yet we also knew we needed to give a broad enough base that our students could interact well with all functions of business in order to provide leadership. Most of our partner businesses told us they wanted generalists with a few hard entry-level skills, so we chose to go with a single integrated Business Management major.

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Next we had to select areas of emphasis. Here we referred back to some of the criteria used to select four-year programs. We chose Finance to relieve pressure on BYU-Provo. Over sixty percent of their business majors choose Finance as an emphasis. We wanted to complement the other CES institutions, so we stayed away from programs for which other schools had built a niche, such as International Business and Hospitality at BYU-Hawaii and Organizational Behavior at BYU-Provo. To make our final choices we looked to our customers, the students. We knew there was strong interest in small business and entrepreneurship, and we had faculty experienced in that area, so it went on the list. We also knew of great interest in Sales and Marketing, and we had experienced faculty in that area, so that went on the list too. In the Spirit of Ricks, we added a General Management option, where a student could design his or her own emphasis. There was some talk of an E-business emphasis, but we decided instead that all our students should get basic E-business training as part of the junior core.

We had our framework, or so we thought. But near the end of February, a formal poll of all students planning on enrolling in junior classes this fall indicated that only about 10% were planning on pursuing the entrepreneurial emphasis. This seemed odd, because in previous classroom polls, a sizeable majority of students had indicated a desire to own their own business someday.

Back we went to our consumers, our customers, our co-workers and our competitors. We learned that the entrepreneur emphasis sounded vague: What entry-level skills does it offer? I need work experience before I go it alone. What entry-level skills can I offer?

So we delayed our catalog copy one more time and made more changes, this after we had announced in two previous orientations that we would have an entrepreneurial emphasis. Are we abandoning entrepreneurship as a theme? Hardly! You'll see it surface below under Question #3.

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Conclusion #1: Follow a disciplined process, but listen, listen, listen to your many constituencies. And be willing to change again and again as you gain understanding.

Decision #2: The 120-hour challenge—They say that less is more. Being constrained by 120 credit hours was exasperating at times, but in the end it required us to take a hard look at virtually every class to determine which really were needed. How did we decide?

Initially, the mission statement indicates we are preparing students to enter the work force, so our primary input needed to come from the industries that would ultimately be our consumers. We asked them which skills they felt were lacking in today's business school graduates. Only one dominant theme emerged: Too many have poor writing skills. We knew we needed to beef up our written communication program. The English department graciously agreed to establish an Advanced Writing for Business class.

Next we needed to decide where we could cut. We had just added 3 credits—traveling in the wrong direction since most other university programs have 128 credits without religion! Well, we simply went down our list of outcomes, and measured each “typical” business course against our list of desired outcomes. We soon realized that you don't have to throw a new class at every outcome on the list. In our internal discussions we concluded that most outcomes are affected more by teaching and learning methods than by the course content. We sensed that our “new wine” would need to be more in teaching methodology than in new classes.

Ultimately, the only classes we felt we might be able to give up were in the economics and math areas, because new technology had provided so many software tools for quantitative analysis. If we could integrate the use of software into our content courses, the students could develop hard analytical skills using the tools they would use in the work force. They would not need separate computer classes.

But giving up some math and economics courses could leave us with a reputation as a “soft” school. Our economics instructors were very concerned with this, and their concerns weighed heavily on our minds.

Years ago, when I first left industry to teach, I remember how frustrated I was when I saw students with good innate business sense change majors out of fear of calculus. I knew that calculus was only needed for a small percentage of career opportunities in business. It was used primarily as a method of screening for analytic ability. I remember vowing that if I ever had anything to do with it, calculus would be eliminated as a core requirement for business majors. It just caused too many otherwise solid students to switch fields of study.

Yet now, when I actually found myself in the position to eliminate calculus, I fretted and worried. I did not want to cause our new program to have a poor reputation. Back we went to our consumers. We polled

trusted business people in a broad cross-section of industries, particularly those who would be likely to hire undergraduates. We posed a hard question: If you had to choose between dropping calculus and adding an additional writing class, what would you choose? About nine in ten voted for the additional writing class.

But would that negatively affect their perception of our students? Not if they learned problem-solving skills using critical thinking and were adept at using spreadsheet and database software to conduct quantitative analyses. We found that most in our survey, including Chief Financial Officers and former Wall Street Investment bankers, admitted to never using calculus in their jobs.

Our economist colleagues have been gracious in supporting us in our decisions. They weren't arrived at carelessly. We will recommend calculus as an enrichment class to any students planning on graduate school or interested in certain highly quantitative areas of finance.

Other typical classes were eliminated using a similar process. In fact, this careful review of traditional courses allowed us to save six credits, to be used as enrichment electives from the liberal arts, in keeping with the business community's desire for us to produce well-rounded graduates.

Conclusion #2: Less is more. Credit limitations require us to carefully craft our courses, orienting individual courses to approach outcomes in multiple ways.

Decision #3: So what will be our "new wine"?—Through all of the curriculum planning, I had a great fear in the back of my mind: How will we be unique—What will be the "new wine" in the BYU-Idaho Business Management Department? It's not in our courses or graduation requirements. Sure, we are doing a few things differently. The very first thing we decided, back in July, was that we would require a professional internship. Few schools actually require one. Still that wasn't revolutionary. I kept praying for guidance, but no stark revelations came.

It was only in the last few weeks, when our visiting professor, Larry Michaelson, came and gave us a fresh look at our program, that it all came together. The fish finally found the water (see Craig Bell's article following).

It would be the way in which our students learn that will make us unique, not courses added or deleted, not revolutionary new fields of study. It would also be in the way that our department helps students from many different majors across campus to learn how they can take their love of a given field of study and make a living doing it.

It had been in our mission statement all along, but I couldn't see it: "to create a learning environment for students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and experiences..."

Some members of my department saw it before I did. But it took an outside consultant to stir up the creative tension, to make life miserable for

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me for a weekend as I struggled over changing the plan once again. The schedules were set, the students had been briefed, etc. Saturday I was angry with Dr. Michaelson for complicating my life. Sunday I was humbled by the spirit; Monday I knew we needed one more major change. We probably won't end up doing things exactly the way Dr. Michaelson recommended, but he did play an important role in waking us up to the need for an experience-based integrated business core that could eventually be used for business minors as well as our majors.

In a nutshell, here's the new wine: our juniors will have the opportunity to take an integrated business core with three basic business management courses—Finance, Marketing and Organizational Behavior—using team learning models to not only master key business concepts, but also improve their teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. They will receive just-in-time tools and conceptual knowledge to allow them to actually form a company, develop a business plan, and launch a business in the course of a semester! This lets them know if they are an entrepreneur at heart. They will experience the problems and the thrill of a new venture. That is valuable experience for any finance or marketing student, even those who will go on to work for large corporations. Those corporations need people who are willing to take the plunge, pushing in new directions for the long-term health of the company.

From this experience they will go out into an internship, and then in their senior year be involved in consulting projects in their area of emphasis. By the time they graduate, they will have learned from textbooks, team activities, and actual hands-on experience, mastering the desired outcomes along the way with a minimum of lecturing on the part of the teachers. Our role will be to discover more and more effective learning activities, to build stronger and stronger business partnerships, and to provide one-by-one direction as needed.

As we learn how to facilitate this process, we can allow students from other majors to participate in our integrated business core, including the new venture creation experience. It may take a few years for us to get to the point where we feel ready, but we realize that our role extends beyond our majors to the entire university.

Sound idealistic? It is. And it scares us to death. But it's the right thing for us to do. We don't know quite what this thing will look like a few years from now. But one thing we are committed to: our students will graduate having learned much more than they would have if we had continued teaching the way we do now. More importantly, they will know how to learn more as life goes on—when we aren't around.

Conclusion #3: Keep plugging away. Stay with it. Your new wine is out there. If you follow the five processes listed above and endure to the end, the Lord will deliver the new wine. But only if you let him. ☺

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