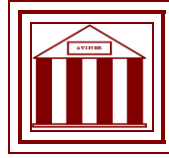


**Athens Institute for Education and Research  
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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series  
EDU2015-1454**

**Education to Vocation:  
Curriculum, Outcomes and Practices Leading to  
Greater Employability for Undergraduate  
Students**

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An Introduction to  
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**Education to Vocation:  
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**Abstract**

Increased responsibilities on business educators in higher education include employment preparation and intentional, developmental mentoring of marketable skills for students. These near-obligations instituted by employability factors, legislation, and the need for young graduates to quickly find jobs, are not to be taken lightly.<sup>2,3</sup> With the additional responsibilities of regional and professional accreditation, in conjunction with university priorities, finding the time and resources necessary to add these additional practices into business education programs is a challenge. This work addresses the increasing demands of educators including: support resources, compensation, adjustments to the current curriculum, outcomes identification and measurement, administrative support, buy in from departmental colleagues, and, time. Key employability factors are addressed and linked to freshman-level and senior-level courses in an effort to better equip students for professional success.

**Keywords:** employability factors, educational strategies, employment skills

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a presentation entitled: Education to Vocation: Considerations for curriculum, outcomes and practices leading to greater employability for undergraduate students which was presented at Athens Institute for Education and Research Education Conference, Athens, GR, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Guskin, A. & Marcy, Mary (2002). Pressures for fundamental reform: Creating a viable academic future. R.M. Diamond (Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>3</sup>Mourshed, M., Farrell, D. & Barton, D. (n.d.). *Education to employment: Designing a system that that works*. Retrieved from <http://mckinseysociety.com/education-to-employment/report/>.

## **Introduction**

The new economy has altered perceptions of the rationale, value and intrinsic motivation for higher education degree attainment. Getting a college degree as a step in one's adult development has now been put into question. These demands now raise the question of time value and perceived value of education. Such demands require a new strategy for addressing such concerns—and new methods for demonstrating such. Increased responsibilities on business educators in higher education include employment preparation and intentional, developmental mentoring of marketable skills for students. These near-obligations instituted by employability factors, legislation, and the need for young graduates to quickly find jobs, are not to be taken lightly.<sup>1</sup> With the additional responsibilities of regional and professional accreditation, in conjunction with university priorities, finding the time and resources necessary to add these additional practices into business education programs is a challenge. The focus of this paper addresses the increasing demands of educators including: support resources, compensation, adjustments to the current curriculum, outcomes identification and measurement.

## **Determining Pedagogical Changes**

The current though evolving format of education in college includes lecture, assessment and office hours. Conversely, the employment preparation mentoring will require a more intentional focus. Such intentionality will be on real work-world activities, exercises, and mentoring interaction to help students attain success in the necessary skill components of specific classes which are indicative of vocation.<sup>2</sup> Further, intentional assessment will be scaffolded into each of the courses. The objective of these researchers in the feasibility of assessing this pedagogical adjustment is that it will help students:

1. Develop confidence in self-assessment of employability-related skills over their 3-4 year undergraduate matriculation period;
2. Acquire evidence of skills that can be discussed during mentoring interactions;
3. Understand the potential career trajectories in light of identified strengths and skills in a meaningful way through mentoring interactions;
4. Acknowledgement of skills that may not be a match with personal abilities, i.e. weaknesses in specific areas (key in helping students step away from incongruent career choices).

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<sup>1</sup>Guskin, A. & Marcy, Mary (2002). Pressures for fundamental reform: Creating a viable academic future. R.M. Diamond (Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>2</sup>Mintz, A. (1978). *George Eliot and the novel of vocation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The current conversation, for the purpose of this study, is to address the feasibility of altering the traditional classroom paradigm to include components relevant to the educational market demands of mentoring, employment preparation and assessment of successful job attainment. Further, insights and comparison examples from other institutions is sought to provide a collegial environment that is mutually supportive of the project. Such conversations will not only help inform the curricular and assessment processes to be proposed, but also foster needed dialogue with colleagues from multiple institutions. This international discussion with colleagues is hoped to be an enriching and thought-building activity for all—and as international demands for employability are apparent, it is timely for all who teach in higher education.

The modality for the investigation is proposed within two specific courses (Principles of Organization and Management, BUSI 210 and Organization and Administrative Behavior, BUSI 448) both of which are required for business majors at a large, private institution. The two courses “bookend” the beginning and end of student’s matriculation and are based on the management curriculum therein. These courses will introduce and transition students from learning, to integrative, to applied experiences.

With the two courses, overlapping in theoretical and conceptual content, the researchers have chosen to comprehensively evaluate the possibility of introducing current employability demands into the courses. Specifically, the choice is to include the following behaviorally-based items into the courses:

1. Experiential learning that is industry based
2. “Hands on” experience with the primary functions of managers in the workplace today
3. Reflection of the hands-on work experience
4. Evaluation of student’s ability to navigate their skill levels and assess future career trajectories based on their self-assessment
5. Assessment based on task completion, thoughtful reflection and self-assessment.<sup>1</sup>

The use of these five behaviorally-based items in both classes will serve to:

1. Introduce students to the real life application (work) of the theories and concepts exposed to in the respective textbooks and course materials
2. Begin early reflection on career trajectories (at the freshman level)
3. Provide opportunity for and value in thoughtful reflection on identifying and awareness of skill, competency and potential for specific managerial functions and tasks

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<sup>1</sup>Finch, D.J., Hamilton, L.K., Baldwin, Riley, & Zehner, M. (2013). An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education and Training*, 55(7), 681-704.

4. Allow students to gain exposure, development and critique of skills
5. Provide opportunity for both formative and summative assessment a. Equip the professor with opportunity for meaningful dialogue with students for purposes of academic advising, career planning and job selection and placement preparation

In addressing key skills identified by others, we see that there is a direct connection with the modifications proposed pedagogically to the courses. Below are the specific skills identified as key indicators which will better equip and prepare undergraduate students:

### **Employability Factors**

- Soft Skills: Listening skills, interpersonal skills, verbal communication skills, professionalism, written communication
- Problem-solving skills: Critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, adaptability, leadership skills
- Pre-graduate experience: Professional confidence, work experience
- Functional skills: Job-specific competencies, job-specific technical skills, knowledge of software
- Academic reputation: Academic performance, program reputation, institutional reputation

Though there is little that can be done to link academic reputation within the context of two specific courses, significant addressment of the first four indicators can be magnified and championed within both the freshman-level and senior-level management courses.

Specific focus on each of the indicators can be linked to course outcomes and practices in the courses:

#### *Soft Skills<sup>1,2</sup>*

Listening skills, interpersonal skills, and verbal communication skills are taught within BUSI 210 through a segment focused on communication, conflict, resolution, and communication theory. They are addressed within BUSI 448 through communication theory and in practice within a community service learning project. Further, professionalism will be addressed in a pending work co-requisite for a specific section of BUSI 210 and then

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<sup>1</sup>Finch, D.J., Hamilton, L.K., Baldwin, Riley, & Zehner, M. (2013). An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education and Training*, 55(7), 681-704.

<sup>2</sup>Helm-Stevens, R., Hall, R., Havens, C., Garcia, M. & Polvi, M. (2014). The impact of service-learning curriculum at a local at-risk high school: An examination of preliminary data. *American Journal of Economics and Business Administration*, 6(3), 122-132.

developed within BUSI 448 through the community service learning project. Writing skills for business environments are instructed within BUSI 210, and then developed through self-reflection in BUSI 448.

### *Problem-solving Skills<sup>1</sup>*

Comprehensively, the set of skills that addresses specific situations, tactile demonstration of responding (appropriately), and rectifying circumstances is viewed as key to both managerial and leader success.<sup>2</sup> Within the confines of BUSI 210, critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, adaptability and leadership skills are distinctively different at the freshman vs. senior level experience. Within the freshman 210 course, the skills are taught and evaluated through lecture, activity, self-reflection and exams. Note that a work co-requisite at the freshman level, exposure to organizational problems and solving will aid in the educational experience along with the professional development. At the senior level, the skills are refined and practiced through exam, self-reflection and the community service learning project.

### *Pre-graduate Experience*

The development and hopefully distinguishing factors of the revised pedagogical approach will be most evident in the professional confidence and work experience derived in both BUSI 210 and BUSI 448. By adding a work co-requisite in the freshman year, early adoption of work skills and practices can be initiated-and directed by the instructor. Such opportunity provides a learning experience that transmits beyond an exercise or activity. It engages employers in the educational experience: honing in on what they want in employees; providing opportunity for their voice in the educational process of developing the working professionals of tomorrow. Further, it provides a partnering for the instructor as it solidifies and provides additional evidence of the important content of the course.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the criteria for evaluating the work co-requisite is clearly linked to the course material and learning objectives of the course through supervisor evaluation and self-reflection.<sup>4</sup> By enveloping a work experience, students engage in work in a learning environment. This is distinctly different from an internship as skills are not practiced and refined in the workplace - rather they are introduced and analyzed. The expectation is that such analysis will equip graduates with advanced skills that are already cogent, balanced and assured. Such will result in the increased integrity and confidence of the students proceeding through this unique environmental experience.

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<sup>1</sup>Underwood, J. (2009). But can they work? Students learning outside of the classroom. *Indian Journal of Economics and Business*, 9(1), 179-185.

<sup>2</sup>Guskin, A. & Marcy, Mary (2002). Pressures for fundamental reform: Creating a viable academic future. R.M. Diamond (Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>3</sup>Underwood, J. (2009). But can they work? Students learning outside of the classroom. *Indian Journal of Economics and Business*, 9(1), 179-185.

<sup>4</sup>Nichols, K. & Nichols, J. (2000). The department head's guide to assessment implementation in administrative and educational support units. Bronx, NY: Agathon Press.

Within the senior-level 448 course, students begin to “branch out” of the academic environment and tactilely practice professional skills through the community service learning experience. Through partnering in teams with peers, and experiencing work in an active research environment whereby they critique their own performance and that of their teammates, each student begins to process experiences in a unique way—different from the traditional educational model.

### *Functional Skills<sup>1</sup>*

Students in these management courses develop specific skills that they can readily associate to the workplace environment. Common practice is to have software competency and information literacy in most programs. By increasing the permeability between employment and classroom students can easier link their book learning to their workplace situations. And, further, the increased permeability at the senior level in BUSI 448 provides opportunity for an “apprenticeship” type experience which will further aid them as they transition into full time employment.

### *Academic Reputation*

The indicator of externality is a challenging concept to weigh in two specific business courses. We have some control, as we can identify linkages between skill development and awareness of those skills in the confidence of students which denotes academic performance. Further, by increasing involvement of employers we readily see their developed affinity with the institution and relationships between various constituents (students, parents, faculty, administrators and employers).

## **Assessing Employability Factors as Indicators of Student Capacity for Success**

Within the context of the five employability factors, specific assessment practices have been identified for student learning in relation to the outcomes desired. For both the BUSI 210 and BUSI 448 courses, the desire is to distinctively develop, assess and assure students of their readiness for the workplace.

Within BUSI 210, as a freshman-level course, the assessment practices focus directly on the knowledge gleaned from the material and experiences in class and the work co-requisite. This is accomplished through traditional means including exams and self-reflection. Additionally, as indicated, the insights of their employer’s assessment of the student’s ability to demonstrate understanding of the concepts and apply them in real-world situations. The composite created within the course allows students to understand the specific

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<sup>1</sup>Finch, D.J., Hamilton, L.K., Baldwin, Riley, & Zehner, M. (2013). An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education and Training*, 55(7), 681-704.



demonstration of key concepts in the class, and further develop them through their matriculation and early work experiences.

Within BUSI 448, the senior level course strives to embolden students for employment and workplace readiness via several means. Though traditional measures such as tests and self-reflection are used as criteria to gauge student learning, the opportunities provided through tactile experience aid in the comprehensive learning strategies for the course. By providing a community service learning project students are challenged to collaborate in groups with peers, develop outcomes and targets for the project and deliver to an external audience. The evaluation of such is accomplished through self-reflection along with peer assessment and site contact perceptions of performance.

## Conclusion

Preparing students for success in the new economy is akin to a new educational frontier for academicians in many fields. Within business, and in consideration of industry demands, specific skills must be learned, practiced and articulated in order for emerging professionals to secure and retain meaningful employment.

As educators in this tenuous environment, identifying specific educational strategies for developing these employability indicators for emerging professionals requires a retooling of the traditional classroom, exercises and assessment methodologies. It also requires modification in evaluation and assessment practices which not only measure the new indicators but also assure our students and employers that our graduates are well-equipped and prepared for whichever work trajectory they choose.

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