

# Adding Value To The First-Year Experience: Embedding Self And Major Exploration In The College Of Business Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper details the First-Year Career Development Program (First-Year Program) – a component of a comprehensive multi-year program designed to guide business students through self-assessment and the selection of an appropriate business major and ultimately to prepare them to secure professional career positions. The First-Year Program is designed to integrate student self-assessment and career and business major exploration into the First-Year Experience. A survey of students who participated in the First-Year Program indicated a high level of student satisfaction. It further indicated that participants were more positive about completing their degree programs at the regional university where the First-Year Program is conducted. The First-Year Program was developed collaboratively by Career and Academic Planning Center professionals and College of Business faculty.*

**Keywords:** First-Year Career Development, Business and First-Year Programs, First-Year Program, Career Planning for Business Majors, Business Curriculum and Career Planning, Career Development Programs, First-Year Self Assessment, Self-Assessment for Business Majors

## INTRODUCTION

The First-Year Career Development Program (First-Year Program) was developed at a regional university (University) collaboratively by the University's Career and Academic Planning Center (CAP Center) and College of Business (COB). It is incorporated into a freshman year business seminar course required for all first-year COB students.

The First-Year Program is the first component of an inclusive career development program that spans the freshman, junior and senior years. This multi-year Developmental Career Planning Program is designed to prepare COB students for appropriate career positions and to teach them how to secure such positions. The Developmental Career Planning Program has the following objectives:

1. Freshman year:
  - a. Provide COB students with the opportunity and resources to systematically explore themselves, business majors (accounting, entrepreneurship, finance, human resources, management, marketing, MIS), and related occupations.
  - b. Encourage students to consider their interests, values and abilities when selecting a major and developing career plans.
2. Junior year:

- a. Teach junior-year COB students job searching skills they can utilize to secure internships and part-time employment while attending college and full-time employment upon graduation.
  - b. Teach junior-year COB students how to prepare a professional resume that can be easily updated for use in future job searches.
  - c. Teach junior-year COB students how to prepare a professional employment action plan. The goal of this plan is to help students identify actions they can take to enhance their employment marketability prior to graduation.
3. Senior year:
- a. Teach senior-year COB students how to prepare for interviews including the opportunity to participate in mock interviews.
  - b. Increase the level of student participation in the University's programs including job fairs, meeting with alumni, and on-campus interviews with potential employers.
4. The following objective is addressed in all three years as students become familiar with CAP Center resources including seminars and one-on-one professional assistance: Improve levels of student satisfaction with "placement and career services."

The First-Year Program helps COB students begin the self-exploration process that is critical for educational success, decision-making, and goal attainment in college.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

An extensive body of literature on assisting freshmen in their first-year of undergraduate life addresses the realities facing college students today: the complex and confusing experience of college itself (Carter, 2007; Pancer, et al, 2004), the failure of a significant portion of the student body to persist to graduation (Kingsbury, 2005), psychological and other health issues (Fletcher, et al, 2007; Roberti & Storch, 2005), issues of gender and diversity (Gloria and Hird, 2001; Holsendolph, 2006), and the complexity of choices facing college students today, including a constantly changing job market (Levy & Marnane, 2004; McNeil, 2007). Now, perhaps confounding the picture, is evidence that even today's students (the "Millennials") may be of a different type from that of previous generations (Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007).

Cross (1997) aptly describes the freshman year experience as "working out the puzzle" of a college education. Within this farrago of first-year life, freshmen, Cross observes, are inclined to see college as an experience that does something for them, not necessarily something that will happen to them.

Ideally, Cross asserts, college should be a transformative experience wherein students learn to make intellectual and moral decisions ... "to assemble their own narratives" (p. 7). Similarly, Cukras (2006) observes that college students, especially freshmen, are not independent learners and need to develop both cognitive and metacognitive processes of planning, selecting, and monitoring so that they may become self-regulated learners. Seen in this perspective, learning is not "out there" but rather an on-going process of self-assessment ... "cultivating an appreciation of learning and acquiring the habits of the self-directed learner" (p. 11).

These outcomes can be related specifically to career exploration. Robitschek and Cook (1999) investigated concepts of "personal growth initiative" and "coping style" in Harren's model of career decision making. The authors found that for both men and women, college students with higher levels of personal growth initiative were more likely to engage in "environmental exploration" and to have a more "crystallized" vocational identity. Robitschek and Cook suggest that approaches to foster college students' personal growth initiative might result in their gathering more career information and developing an occupational self-concept.

Particularly emphasizing development of self-concept, Daddona and Cooper (2002) stress that even though personal/motivational and social areas were not rated as pressing needs among a group of freshmen, these areas should remain an integral part of an orientation program.

This imperative finds support in Johnson and Orr's (1996) research on the professional development course as a "natural extension" of the freshman seminar. They identify several components that collectively help the student make the transition into adulthood and into the professions. Included among these components are group dynamism and responsibility, human relations and attitude, and achieving a professional image. These attitudinal or personal attributes are complemented with such skills as conducting a job search and setting career path goals.

A related aspect to Daddona and Cooper's research entails the relationship between the presence or absence of well-defined vocational interest patterns among college freshmen and later vocational achievement and satisfaction. Intuitively, one might expect that a well-defined interest pattern would propel an individual toward a rewarding career.

Sackett and Hansen (1995) found little relationship between the interest pattern and later career satisfaction. This perhaps suggests that flexibility in vocational choice may lead to greater career satisfaction. They caution, however, that the sample in question was based in the 1970s, and today's students may represent a very different context, as suggested in the introductory paragraph of this literature review. Conceivably, as Elam, et al (2007) suggest, the collaborative and group-mindedness of the "Millennial" students would imply greater peer influence in the formative stages of interest discussed by Sackett and Hansen, thereby influencing long-term career satisfaction.

### **THE FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM**

The First-Year Program for COB students was developed to help students to accomplish the following:

1. Identify their abilities, interests, and values.
2. Identify a business major that is well-matched to their abilities, interests, and values.
3. Identify and describe three specific occupations relating to the business major that interest them.

To be effective for first-year students and to accomplish the goals of the Developmental Career Planning Program the First-Year Program was embedded in the University's First-Year Experience (FYE) seminar required for all first-year students. The FYE seminar is a three-credit general education course limited to 20 students, and designed to help students adjust to the University and become successful in college. Its purpose is to help students learn about themselves, the college experience and what is necessary for academic success at the college level. Students who have completed a FYE seminar have higher rates of retention when compared with students who do not complete the course (Tahamont, Chaskes, Carrigan, & Bolland, 2001).

Additionally, where feasible, the FYE seminar is related to the student's major and offered by the major department. Such is the case with the COB first-year course entitled Organizational Behavior. This three-credit course introduces new COB students to the various business majors and related subject matter. The First-Year Program fits extremely well with the goals of the FYE seminar because of its emphasis on helping students learn about and use resources to explore themselves and their particular business major. This is very important to first-year success because although the first-year of college is one of uncertainty and tremendous adjustment (Tinto, 1999), students who are successful are those who participate in intentional and educationally beneficial activities and use available campus resources. Campuses that strive to be successful teach students how to use institutional resources for success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005). This is the intention of the First-Year Program and the FYE course.

The FYE seminar has the following four major goals and includes transitional topics to assist with personal, social and academic adjustment and persistence at the University:

1. Strengthen writing and critical thinking skills by applying them to specific course content.
2. Cultivate library research skills within the context of a specific course.
3. Reinforce the value of cooperative (group/team) learning and working as a team.
4. Strengthen classroom management skills. This has to do with helping students learn how to use their time effectively both in and out of the classroom.

The seminar course for COB students differs in one important respect from FYE seminars presently offered to other students attending the University. The First-Year Program is incorporated into the seminar course for COB students.

A major component of the introductory-level business seminar course is self assessment and career exploration covering the various business majors noted in the Introduction. Upon admission to the University, COB first-year students are asked to select a business major. Students sometimes select a particular business major with little or no knowledge of how their interests, values and abilities relate to 1) the course work required to complete the major and/or 2) the kinds of work the major will prepare them to do after graduation.

In addition, some students are not aware of the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the work related to their business major. The First-Year Program requires students to explore themselves and the various business majors to either reaffirm their choices or redirect them to different business majors that offer better matches with their interests, values and abilities.

To accomplish the First-Year Program goals the COB seminar class spends one class period visiting the CAP Center early in the semester. The CAP Center professional staff provides an overview of 1) the multi-year Developmental Career Planning Program, 2) CAP Center services, and 3) various print and Internet resources that can be used for self-assessment and career exploration. Students are required to explore the three areas listed below (self, business majors, and related occupations) and complete an Exploration Packet provided by the CAP Center. The Exploration Packet provides assignments designed to guide students through the exploration process.

1. Self Exploration. Students complete the MyRoad Personality Profiler to increase awareness of their interests, values and abilities and are assigned to complete a coordinating worksheet in the Exploration Packet. MyRoad ([www.MyRoad.com](http://www.MyRoad.com)) is an interactive career guidance system that assists students with self and major/career exploration.
2. Business Major Exploration. Students explore the business major they selected upon admission to the University as well as two other business majors that they find interesting. Students are then required to identify six occupations related to the three business majors they believe may be most compatible with their interests, values and abilities. Based on the results of the business major exploration, students are asked to either reaffirm their original choice of a particular business major or to select a different business major.
3. Career Exploration. Students are required to provide detailed descriptions of three occupations related to the specific business major they believe is most compatible with their interests, values and abilities. The descriptions must include job responsibilities, required skills, and salary range.

Completed Exploration Packet assignments are reviewed by CAP Center professionals and then by the COB faculty members who are teaching the seminar course. These faculty members incorporate the grades on the completed Exploration Packet assignments into the students' semester course grades.

In addition to participating in the exploration described above, throughout the semester COB faculty members who teach the freshman seminars engage students in conversations relating to business occupational and career choices.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A survey was developed to assess the effectiveness of the First-Year Program. The survey had three goals:

1. To assess the First-Year Program's effectiveness based on student evaluations of the various components.
2. To determine the percentage of participating students who changed from their original business major to a different business major.
3. To determine if the First-Year Program had any effect on the participating students' attitudes toward completing their degrees at the University.

The survey instrument is included as Appendix A.

**RESEARCH RESULTS AND CONCLUSION**

The survey results (shown in Table I) were very positive, with 87.5% indicating their overall evaluation to be “very effective” or “effective.”

**Table I  
Summary of Survey Responses (Part One)**

	Percent of Students Indicating Very Effective or Effective
Identifying your abilities, interests and values.	<b>87.5</b>
Learning about the various business majors (Accounting, Marketing, Management, MIS, Entrepreneurship, Finance, and Human Resource Management).	<b>83.3</b>
Identifying those business majors that are best suited to your abilities, interests and values.	<b>70.8</b>
Increasing your knowledge of business-related occupations.	<b>79.2</b>
Increasing your knowledge of occupations related primarily to your business major.	<b>70.8</b>
Learning how to research information about occupations that are consistent with your abilities, interests, and values.	<b>75.0</b>
Identifying interesting occupations.	<b>66.7</b>
Increasing your awareness of CAP Center services and how CAP Center Professionals can assist you.	<b>75.0</b>
Your overall evaluation of the First Year Program.	<b>87.5</b>

Student ratings pertaining to identifying occupations and learning more about them were the lowest. In addition, some students indicated that they did not find “identifying those business majors that are best suited to your abilities, interests and values,” to be easy; only 70.8% rated this as very effective or effective. This indicates the need for further improvements in the First-Year Program.

The second part of the questionnaire is focused on issues surrounding 1) COB students being able to complete successfully their degree programs and 2) the viability of COB’s efforts to retain students. The percentage of students indicating that they changed business major was low – only 12.5%. The fact that some students did decide to change their business majors during the first year of their studies is significant; it has at least four very beneficial effects:

1. Students took the First-Year Program processes seriously.
2. For those students who did change their business major during the freshman year, they were able to complete their degree programs in a different business major without taking any additional courses. If business students postpone changing business majors, they may have to complete more than 120 semester hours normally required to graduate.
3. Those the business students who did not change their business major were reassured that their initial choice was a good one.
4. Even if a business student did or did not change business major, the chances of those students who participated in the First-Year Program remaining at the University and completing their degrees was increased as a result of having the knowledge that their choices of majors were probably good ones.

The last conclusion is reinforced by the student responses to the second item in Table II. After completing the First-Year Program, 82.6% felt more positive about completing their degrees at the University.

**Table II  
Summary of Survey Responses (Part Two)**

Statement	Yes	No
After completing the First-Year Program, I decided to change my major or specialization.	12.5%	87.5%
After completing the First-Year Program, I felt more positive about completing my degree at the University.	82.6%	17.4%

The survey results indicate that the First-Year Program was very beneficial to many first-year business students. First, it required them to seriously consider their abilities, interests, and values. “Knowing thyself” is a critical step in choosing a well matched major. Second, students learned what knowledge and skills are required to be successful in their chosen major (as well as other business majors of interest). This information allowed them to evaluate the various business majors in terms of their being a good fit with their abilities, interests and values. Students also began to explore the career opportunities associated with their majors and other business majors of interest. Finally, students were familiarized with the multi-year Developmental Career Planning Program. This provided them with an overview of the processes involved in preparing to secure professional positions both for internships and at graduation.

## **LIMITATIONS**

It should be noted that this study is limited by a sample population numbering a little over 100. The survey response rate of 23% was not disappointing, however.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Developmental Career Planning Program appears to be beneficial for many business majors. In addition, the self and major exploration component in the First-Year Program is helpful for affirming major and course selection, as suggested by the research literature. Moreover, the Developmental Career Planning Program and particularly the First-Year Program can be embedded in any major-specific First-Year Experience seminar. It allows for deep exploration of the major and its association with related careers. As suggested by the research literature, exploration of majors and careers can prove to be invaluable in the critical first year as students struggle to choose and affirm their selection of major, plan for the future, and build their personal narratives in the quest for self-directed learning. The continuation of the Developmental Career Planning Program in the junior and senior year can also be replicated on any campus and for any major.

## **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

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**APPENDIX A**

**Survey for the COB the First-Year Career Development Program**

Dear College of Business Student,

We need about five minutes of your time. Please help us! During fall 2006 you were enrolled in the [...] Seminar Course, Organizational Behavior. We need your feedback on the First-Year Career Development Program (First-Year Program) included in the course. This Program was designed to help you accomplish the following:

1. Identify your abilities, interests, and values.
2. Identify one or more business majors/specializations that are well matched to your abilities, interests, and values.
3. Identify three specific occupations interest you.
4. Research and describe the three occupations and explain how they are consistent with your abilities, interests and values.

**Part One:** Please rate the effectiveness of the First-Year Program in the areas shown below.

<b>Please indicate the benefit to you of each of the following:</b>	Very Effective	Effective	Moderately Effective	Somewhat Ineffective	NA
Identifying your abilities, interests and values.					
Learning about the various business majors (Accounting, Marketing, Management, MI MIS, Entrepreneurship, Finance, and Human Management).					
Identifying those Business majors that are best suited to your abilities, interests and values.					
Increasing your knowledge of business-related occupations					
Increasing your knowledge of occupations related primarily to your business major.					
Learning how to research information about occupations that are consistent with you're abilities, interests, and values.					
Identifying interesting occupations.					
Increasing your awareness of CAP Center services and how CAP Center professionals can assist you.					
Your overall evaluation of the First Year Program					

**Part Two:** Please rate your changes in business major/changes in attitude toward degree completion at [...] resulting from the First-Year Program.

<b>Please answer Yes or No to each of the following statements.</b>	Yes	No
After completing the First-Year Program, I decided to change my major or specialization.		
After completing the First-Year Program, I felt more Positive about completing my degree at [...] University.		

**Thank you very much!**