



The Professional Development Series: A Path for Achieving Career-Focused Learning Outcomes

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The Professional Development Series: A Path for Achieving Career-Focused Learning Outcomes

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Eastern Kentucky University's College of Business proactively responded to the well-documented student need for developing professional skills by creating a series of courses that provide the critical skills needed for success throughout their careers. The implementation and content of these courses are described, as well as preliminary indicators of their impact.

INTRODUCTION

“The notion that the nation’s colleges and universities are failing to prepare their students for the world of work appears to no longer be a matter of debate: it has become conventional wisdom” (Tora, 2023). The need for career-focused learning is well-documented. The Quality Assurance (QA) Commons was founded in 2016 to ensure all learners are prepared for the changing dynamics of the workforce and economy (QA Commons, 2023). In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the Council on Postsecondary Education (KyCPE) has partnered with the QA Commons on a strategic initiative to prepare students for the 21st-Century workforce (QA Commons, 2023). The Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE) highlights U.S. employers reporting difficulty in filling jobs, noting that “Today’s high school graduates often lack the skills that employers need and the critical thinking skills that colleges expect” (Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2023).

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has identified eight competencies for a career-ready workforce; they indicate that employers deem communication, critical thinking, and teamwork as most important (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2023). NACE found in its 2023 survey of employers that the top attributes employers seek on candidates’ resumes were, in rank order, problem-solving skills, ability to work in a team, strong work ethic, analytical/quantitative skills, and, in a tie for fifth, communication skills and technical skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2023). The

College to Jobs Playbook includes a career readiness curriculum as one of its recommended interventions to ease the transition from college to career (Deming, et al., 2023).

National and international needs related to career-focused learning outcomes were echoed in the feedback from employers of graduates of Eastern Kentucky University’s College of Business (COB) as it sought feedback from numerous stakeholders, including its advisor board members, employers of its graduates, alumni, current students, and faculty members. This feedback informed several recommendations that ultimately led to revisions to the business core.

Practicing professionals indicated that Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) College of Business graduates are well-prepared in business content areas; their greatest need was in professional skills – communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and other “soft” skills. As indicated in Figure 1, feedback as to the needs of ECU College of Business graduates related to career readiness indicated several areas for improvement: communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, personal finance, and analytical skills. These needs closely parallel the needs identified by QA, KyCPE, FEE, and NACE, described above.

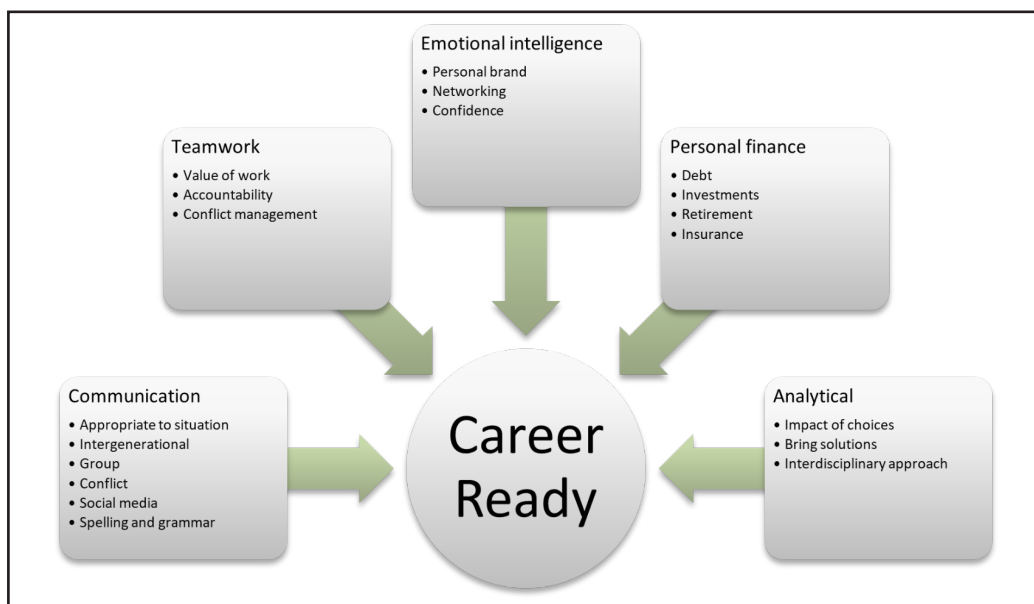


Figure 1: Feedback from Employers of ECU COB Graduates

These needs informed business core curriculum revision, and it informed revision to our learning competencies as well. These revisions are described below.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

The College of Business believes its responsibility expands beyond the classroom. Preparing students for careers upon graduation is a service that will benefit graduates as they begin their careers, and the benefits will continue throughout their careers. The four-course PD series is an opportunity for the CoB to proactively implement a culture of professionalism to better serve its students.

Students are introduced to our learning competencies during their first semester, and their value in career preparation is highlighted throughout the Professional Development (PD) Series. These courses provide students with specific tools and opportunities to develop the level of professionalism needed for success upon graduation. The learning outcomes are intentional in providing students with practical assignments that will boost their confidence and close the gaps employers have identified.

Learning competencies are reinforced throughout students' business studies in other core courses, and in courses specific to their chosen majors. An infographic (Figure 2) is prominently displayed in our classrooms, and many course syllabi include icons and descriptions of learning competencies relevant to course content. The College of Business Core Competencies, which serve as a foundation for the PD Series, include:

- Functions of Business – Demonstrate knowledge base and acumen in the functional areas of business with an interdisciplinary approach
- Sustainable Innovation – Apply quantitative analysis, critical thinking, and creative thinking to improve decision-making
- Interactive Communication – Communicate effectively and interactively with consideration of audience, message, and delivery
- Systems Thinking – Recognize the impact of macro environment factors and trends
- Authentic Professional Brand – Achieve an authentic professional brand through professional development and the cultivation of emotional intelligence and a moral compass

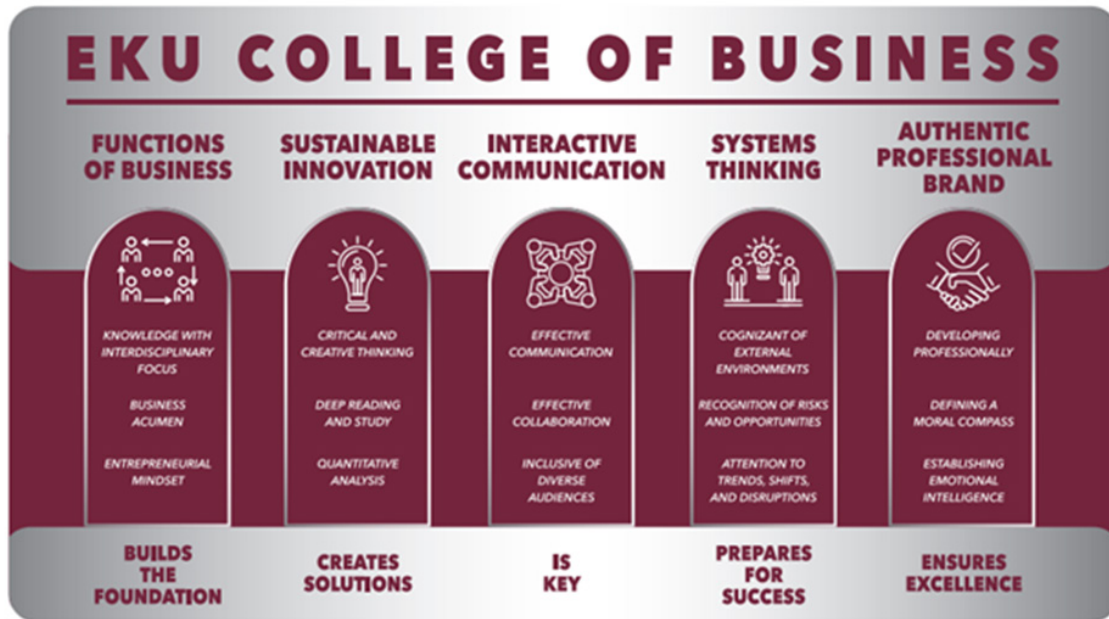


Figure 2: Learning Competencies

Understanding the value of these learning competencies throughout their studies provides a strong foundation for student success.

TRANSPARENT & TRANSFERABLE APPROACH TO TEACHING

A. PURPOSE

The vision of EKU’s College of Business is “Leading transformative education, preparing innovative professionals for global impact.” The PD Series is an integral component of that transformative education, and it is central to our mission as a school of opportunity.

B. TASKS

The EKU College of Business Professional Development Series consists of four 1-credit hour courses, including:

- BUS 100: Students are introduced to professionalism.
- BUS 200: Students begin developing as a professional.
- BUS 300: Students begin promoting their professional/personal brand.
- BUS 400: Students learn how to ensure success as a professional.

Each course builds on content students learned in the previous course. Successful completion of the series ensures students will have the employability skills needed to enter the workforce.

Common themes found in each of the PD classes are:

- College of Business Core Competencies
- Communication: written, verbal, non-verbal and listening
- Critical and creative thinking
- Ethical decision-making/Ethics in the workplace
- Cover letter and resume
- Networking at school and on-the-job
- Career Portfolio

BUS 100, Professional Development One, is designated as the College's student success seminar, a First-Year Program course required of all first-year EKU students. The course includes University required content to include effective time management, effective study skills and test taking strategies, campus involvement, cultural competence and sound decision-making.

Assignment examples in BUS 100 are:

- Making the transition to higher education
- Financial Literacy Pre-test
- CoB Core Comps Pre-survey
- Professional email assignment
- Critical thinking exercises
- SMART goal setting method

Students learn the importance of Professional/Career Development in BUS 200, Professional Development Two. The focus is on transferring what is learned in a student's major to his/her career, the advantages of a cooperative education experience, and professional appearance. Students learn how to identify and build relevant skills, how personal values impact careers and how preferences connect with careers.

Assignment examples in BUS 200 are:

- Identify career stages
- Sustainable Innovations assignment
- Systems Thinking assignment
- Skills, Values, and Preferences assessments
- Student Development Plan
- Begin Career Portfolio

Students take a deeper dive into career development in BUS 300, Professional Development Three. Career development skills are enhanced by practicing decision-making, building a personal brand, exploring job search tools and strengthening critical thinking, reading and reflection skills. Students begin a career portfolio in BUS 200, and they continue to build the portfolio throughout their remaining coursework. The portfolio includes the CoB Core Competencies (Figure 2). Students will include work completed in the business core courses as well as, if employed, samples of work from their jobs. Students will also recognize the connection between relationships and career development and explore a diverse business world.

Assignment examples in BUS 300 are:

- Creating an Elevator Pitch
- Building a Brand
- Conduct a job search and analyze findings
- Complete a Career Development Plan
- The Value of LinkedIn
- Preparing for an Information Interview

BUS 400, Professional Development Four, closes the gap between traditional college curriculum and the skills employers expect from graduates. The course focuses on emotional intelligence, cross-cultural relationships and inclusivity, collaboration and the tools needed to manage a career. Additional focus is placed on interviewing and negotiating a job offer, effective leadership, the value of a mentor, collaboration, and the basics of financial planning.

Assignment examples in BUS 400 are:

- Emotional Intelligence Scenario
- Cultural Diversity Assignment
- Interview Preparation
- Leadership Skills Assessment
- Negotiation
- Final Career Portfolio Presentation

C. CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

Upon completion of the PD Series, our graduates will have developed communication, teamwork, and other skills needed as they launch successful careers.

ANALYSIS/ASSESSMENT

PD Series courses were rolled out sequentially, so our assessment cycle for the Series is not yet complete. Collection of data includes Core Competency pre-surveys (BUS 100) and post-surveys (BUS 400), as well as pre- and post-tests for Financial Literacy in BUS 100 and BUS 400, respectively. Course evaluations are utilized for evaluation of classroom experiences. Although in its infancy, positive results are evident.

Anecdotal examples from classes taught include:

- More students attending job fair and networking events
- Students speaking up in class for the first time
- A student having the courage to reach out to the Student Government Association (SGA) office after receiving encouragement from a professor. The student identified a desire to be involved with SGA on campus. That student now holds a leadership position with SGA.
- Students meeting with industry professionals to conduct informational interviews
- Students writing resumes for the first time

APPLICATION TO TEACHING

At this point, junior business majors have taken BUS 100 and BUS 200, and many are enrolled in BUS 300 currently. This fall, faculty members report increased engagement in upper-level classes; that engagement is evident in both the level and the quality of student participation in career fairs as well. Further evidence of the value added by the PD Series is expected as the courses are fully implemented.

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