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Keeping Business Education Relevant:
A Contextual Curriculum to Sustain Secondary Business Education Programs
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KEEPING BUSINESS EDUCATION RELEVANT: A CONTEXTUAL CURRICULUM TO SUSTAIN SECONDARY BUSINESS EDUCATION PROGRAMS

ABSTRACT

The future of secondary business education is being threatened by increased educational reform and changes in student interests that coincide with changes in the labor market. From 1982 to 1998 the percentage of high school students earning three credits or more in business education has decreased by nearly 60%. It is clear that students are not interested in the courses that make up traditional business education. High school students have shown a dramatic interest in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship has also been recognized as an excellent contextual framework from which business academic subject matter can be learned. Contextual learning increases academic achievement which is a focal point of reform in vocational and career education. A tremendous opportunity exists for secondary business education curriculum developers to design an integrated contextual curriculum that addresses reform challenges and revitalizes student interests.

INTRODUCTION

People are most often puzzled by simple questions. At the 26th Annual Peter L. Agnew Memorial Lecture, Dr. Burt Kaliski asked a very simple question. "What should it be" (Kaliski, 2002)? Secondary and postsecondary business education teachers, students, and researchers in the audience were asked to consider the future of business education. Defining the conceptual framework for the future of secondary business education curriculum is challenging but it is being forced by changes in the current environment.

Business education has enjoyed a prominent role in America's secondary vocational education programs throughout history. Business education encompasses the education for, about, and in business (Kaliski, 2002). The National Business Education Association (NBEA) currently maintains curriculum standards for 11 business content areas. Accounting, business law, career development, communication, computation, economics and personal finance, entrepreneurship, information technology, international business, management, and marketing make up the NBEA curriculum. Traditionally, secondary business educators adhere to the practice of delivering business education content in the form of individual courses. Each secondary program determines the subject matter they will cover and which courses they will offer. Many programs attempt to offer an individual course in all or most of the NBEA content areas. The current research suggests that significant changes to the curriculum are required to sustain secondary business education as a vital component of the future of vocational and career education.

Education reform and changes in student interests and enrollment that are based on current labor market trends are shaping the need for drastic changes in the secondary business education curriculum. While Kaliski (2002) was speaking of a larger question regarding the comprehensive conceptual framework of business education, many believe the best place to start the process of defining what it should be is with curriculum. Curriculum reflects the state of the field; what is

considered important, what is being taught (content or conceptual structure), and how it is taught (process; Lewis, 1999). Secondary business educators must understand and accept the current environment and challenges that are shaping the need to change.

METHOD

The theoretical development of this paper is shaped around the author's entrepreneurial and teaching experiences, and a variety of literature and research sources that supports the need for a change in secondary business education curriculum. The sources were gathered from peer-reviewed journals, books, lectures, and published governmental research. The solution proposed is a practitioner's response to the challenges being faced.

SHAPING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Career and technical education programs in the U.S. exist because of federal legislation (Rowjewski, 2002). Beginning with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, the federal government has had a predominant influence in determining the scope of secondary vocational and technical education. The governments' purpose in providing vocational education support has historically been to prepare students for entry-level jobs in occupations not requiring postsecondary training. Over the last 15 years, however, this purpose has shifted towards broader preparation that develops the academic, vocational, and technical skills of students in vocational education programs (United States Department of Education, 2000).

Current federal legislation supporting vocational education, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act was signed into law in 1998. Perkins III, the latest version of the law emphasizes improving academic achievement, preparing students for postsecondary education, and traditional work preparation. In an October, 2003 web cast sponsored by The National Dissemination Center for Career and Technical Education, a Bush administration representative described future legislation that is currently being proposed to lawmakers. In addition to dramatic changes in the way funds are distributed, the Bush administration envisions an increased emphasis upon assessment and standards to compliment the academic mission of No Child Left Behind and an enhanced emphasis upon academic rigor (Policy and Directions for Career and Technical Education, 2003). Federal policy makers have noted the challenges faced by secondary vocational education programs to increase academic achievement and testing. Policy makers are focused on these challenges as they assess program effectiveness and consider reauthorization of current federal legislation and funding (United States Department of Education, 2002).

Lynch (2000) reminds us that educational reform will continue to shape career and technical education curriculum. He believes current reforms call for a contextually-based curriculum that is grounded on the need for students to demonstrate a mastery of skills, high academic standards, and general education knowledge. In 1992, the U.S. Department of Labor released the findings of a research study completed by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The SCANS report concluded that more than half of the students completing high school in the United States did not possess the skills necessary to find and hold a good job (United States Department of Labor, 1991). The SCANS report determined that the

characteristics of the information-, service-, and communication-centered modern workplace have drastically changed from the industrial workplace of the early 1900s, due to advances in technology and global competition. It also suggested the use of contextual curriculum:

We believe, after examining the findings of cognitive science, that the most effective way of teaching skills is in context. Placing learning objectives within real environments is better than insisting that students first learn in the abstract what they will then be expected to apply. (United States Department of Labor, 1992, p. 16)

These are just two examples of the literature that indicates the need for a dramatic change in the way schools deliver curriculum. It illustrates and validates the need for sweeping change in secondary business education. This is not a call from a subtle addition of a few contextual lessons, or an addition of a new course, but a call for a new curricula paradigm that is centered on contextual learning.

CHANGES IN STUDENT INTERESTS AND ENROLLMENT

From the 1980s to the late-1990s, high school vocational course enrollment declined as academic course enrollment increased. Increases in high school graduation requirements and long-term trends for higher skill levels in the labor market attribute to these trends (United States Department of Education, 2001). However, increased academic requirements account for only a portion of the decrease in overall vocational enrollment. During the period from 1982 to 1998 students consistently increased the overall total number of courses they completed as graduation requirements increased. Students completed fewer vocational credits during the same period. Students did not simply decrease their number of vocational courses in order to increase their academic courses. So, what explains the overall decline in vocational enrollment?

The overall decline in vocational enrollment was primarily due to substantial declines in the two largest vocational areas—trade and industry and business. These vocational areas roughly correspond to occupations that have experienced below-average growth rates since the early 1980s. Declines were the largest in business education. Students completing more than 3 credits in business education declined from 11.6% in 1982 to 4.8% in 1998 (United States Department of Education, 2001). Many traditional business courses are no longer desirable to secondary students because of changes in the labor market which and an associated decrease in student interests. Students forced to choose fewer elective vocational courses are not choosing business education. While technology courses are overflowing, accounting courses struggle to recruit students. Secondary business curriculum developers must identify an emerging content area that is desirable to students and growing in the labor market and develop a curriculum design that appeals to students.

FRAMEWORK OF A SOLUTION

In order to sustain secondary business education in the future, the curriculum must meet a set of demanding challenges. It must meet the demands of education reform. It must meet the requirements of current federal legislation and applicable to anticipated future requirements. It

must offer an integrated pathway for students with a clear connection to postsecondary training. The curriculum must help to increase enrollment by appealing to students and parents and with a framework focused on positive labor market trends and student interests. It must offer an opportunity for students to satisfy their interests in business education without requiring an unreasonable number of individual courses. The curriculum must integrate business education content into a comprehensive framework. The curriculum should utilize emerging design methodologies and learning strategies that appeal to a broad base of student interests and a diverse population. These challenging demands require a paradigm shift among secondary business education curriculum developers and an innovative approach to program design.

The primary emphasis of current and future federal legislation concerning vocational and career education seems to be centered on increased academic rigor. All business teachers are challenged by contemporary education philosophies to demonstrate how their classes contribute to a students' academic achievement (Gleason, 2004). For many students that study vocational and career education, academic achievement is a struggle. However, many believe that academic achievement is attainable for most students if the learning takes place in a contextual environment. "Educators of adults have long recognized that relating instructional content to the specific contexts of learners' lives and interests increases motivation to learn." (Dirkx and Prenger 1997, p. 2). The SCANS report provided clear direction that contextual curriculum was the best way to teach students skills. Does a contextual framework exist within business education content that could increase academic rigor and meet the other challenges facing it?

Recent studies indicate that 7 out of 10 high school students want to operate their own business someday (Glenn, 2003). As the landscape of corporate America is downsized, high school and college graduates are left to consider alternative careers and small business options. The information technology age of the late 1990s spurred tremendous entrepreneurial innovation and small business creation in the United States. Many business educators have recognized this trend and are offering entrepreneurship courses. Some are recognizing the contextual significance of entrepreneurship and are calling for its integration in traditional vocational and academic courses. Entrepreneurship provides an excellent contextual framework for an integrated secondary business education curriculum. "When entrepreneurship is viewed as a context within which to position learning, the lesson becomes relevant across many disciplines, virtually all pathways, and to all function of business, and therefore, to all business courses" (Gleason 2004, p. 48).

By adopting an entrepreneurial context for a new integrated business education curriculum, secondary business educators can drastically improve their ability to meet the demands of education reform and decreased student enrollment. By eliminating individual business education courses and adopting a two-year, integrated program model, business education becomes a viable career path alternative to marketing, health occupational, and other career pathways and career academy programs. Many of these programs have experienced increased enrollment while business education decreases. Academic rigor is increased by integrating business subjects and traditional academic subject matters within a context that will engage students and provide them a sense of ownership and relevance. Students will use their business creations as a springboard to create meaning and purpose in their learning. This modular approach would meet the federal legislative requirements of a clear pathway and would be

designed using NBEA standards. A comprehensive business overview with an entrepreneurial focus would also prepare students for a variety of postsecondary business programs.

In addition to meeting federal standards, an integrated program with an entrepreneurial context would drastically improve the appeal to students and increase enrollment. Instead of attempting to market traditional courses or a pathway made up of a series of individual courses, secondary educators would have an opportunity to promote an innovative program that allows students to explore their personal interests while covering a comprehensive business and academic curriculum. Labor market trends indicate that small business creation will continue to soar as people react to the changing job market in large corporations. Students have already indicated their interest in owning or managing their own business. Business education programs that offer an innovative and interesting opportunity for students to pursue their personal interests and place the locust of control with the student will see a resurgence of student enrollment.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STEPS

It is clear that secondary business educators face demanding challenges from education reform and changes in student interests and enrollments. While some business educators have been willing to migrate their teaching interests to new subject areas such as technology and health occupations, others hold fast to the belief that basic business education is critical to the success of students that plan to enter the workforce or pursue a postsecondary business education. The challenge is to design a new curriculum model that meets these demands and reestablishes business education as a leader in vocational and career education for the future. Innovation in curriculum is the key to the revitalization and sustainability of secondary business education.

“The need to revise or eliminate outdated curriculum and develop new programs to meet emerging work or family trends is a seemingly endless occurrence” (Rojewski 2002). Veteran business educators have been faced with this challenge many times in the past. The current challenge is to design a curriculum that integrates comprehensive subject matter and interests students with a contextual emphasis. Leaders in secondary business education should lead the field to an adoption of new philosophies and an exploration of new concepts that will sustain secondary business education. We must answer Kaliski’s simple question, “what should it be?”

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