

Re-Designing the MBA Experience: Enhancing Student Professional Development through Innovative Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services

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ABSTRACT

The business world paradigm of constant change challenges business schools to form an innovative nexus by preparing students for the business leadership of the future. The balance of academic and professional engagement is ever more important as employers place more weight on soft skills among their new hires. Business programs must be innovative in their approaches to providing students with opportunities to develop soft skills that help them succeed in the increasingly diverse and demanding workplace requirements. This paper presents the development of the Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services innovation offered to MBA students in a state supported business school in California.

Key Words

Innovation, Engagement, Impact, AACSB Standards, Co-Curricular Innovation, Professional Development, Soft-Skills, Leadership, Career Development, Communication, Collaboration, Value-Added Student Services

INTRODUCTION

Changing times require agility and relevance in business education as well as in business practices. The constantly changing business environment calls for business educators to provide quality programs that are relevant to the evolving needs of the industry in order to produce innovative leaders who are equipped to help organizations through the fast paced, technologically challenged, and globally competitive business environment. It is imperative that business schools provide a balance of academic and professional development programs in a timely manner.

In the context of growing diversity-coupled with a constantly changing business environment, business educators should strive to be relevant by addressing the needs of the business community through academic and professional engagement students according to their college’s mission. With the new accreditation standard AACSB also encourages an appropriate intersection of academic and professional engagement, challenges business schools to ‘innovate’, and inspires educators to pursue continuous improvement in educational programs and other mission-based activities of the business school (AACSB, 2017).

Consistent with the view that a quality business program is aligned with business practices, business schools are encouraged to pay attention to providing students with professional development opportunities and give more weight to teaching the ‘soft skills’ going forward (AACSB, 2017; Ghannadian, 2013). The Oxford Dictionary defines soft-skills as “personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively with other people.” In contrast to hard-skills, which are tangible and directly related to occupation, soft-skills are intangible and consists of a combination of interpersonal skills, communication skills, personal qualities, and attitudes. In the context of business education, hard-skills may include functional business knowledge and business problem solving skills and soft-skills, leadership, team building, communication skills, etc. Soft-skills are difficult to measure and hard to obtain as they relate to innate personal qualities reflecting culturally rooted upbringing of individuals. Nevertheless, soft-skills are critically important for business graduates in order for them to succeed in an increasingly diverse work environment (Lee, 2006; Sherman, 2011; Walker e. al., 2011; GMAC, 2014). The growing importance of teaching soft-skills, coupled with the persisting needs of employers indicate that business educators must engage in developing personal and professional qualities and skills. The reported gap between the importance and the success in teaching students the necessary ‘soft-skills’ indicates that this may be an area of need for innovation in business education (Lee and Benza, 2015).

The emphasis on ‘professional engagement’ opens a wide variety of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities that students can take in order to experience and strengthen professional engagement during their academic

careers in various business programs. This may call for a shift towards innovative approaches that provide the right type and amount of professional engagement programs that offer flexibility in helping students of diverse backgrounds develop the desired skills. For example, students' needs for oral communication workshops may vary depending on a number of student characteristics such as language skills, personality, confidence, and experience. Some students may need more practices and more individual coaching than the others. The varying degree of acculturation may also be a factor determining the amount of practice necessary before a student develop confidence in public speaking. These additional needs cannot be met in the academic curriculum only for the reason that repeated feedback and practice opportunities are limited in core courses in the academic program. However, additional training opportunities can be provided as value-added services through co-curricular activities and workshops with a purpose to augment the standardized exposures in the core curriculum, which is required of all students. These value-added services can be offered as optional activities that students can choose to participate as needed. They may include but are not limited to workshops, seminars, boot camps, and other activities designed to develop and polish professional skills. They may be offered at no cost to students or at the cost that cover the operating expenses depending on the financial situation of the institution.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to report on a journey of an MBA program, which engaged in innovating student services efforts by providing a series of Value-Added Co-curricular Student Services, and to discuss how the student services program led to further innovation and impact on students, curriculum, and other programs.

Background

Areas of MBA Curricular Innovation

As mentioned in the previous section, business programs need to innovate in order to deliver educational experiences that prepare students for the changing requirements of the industry. Educators have sought sources of innovation in various aspects of business programs. A historical look at the MBA programs revealed that the content of MBA core curriculum had remained relatively unchanged between 2005 and 2013, and that MBA program innovation has taken place mostly in its structure, timing, integration, flexibility, and co-curricular activities (Elliott and Fox, 2015).

Of the most notable type of innovation is the Co-Curricular Innovation which includes a variety of activities, workshops, and seminars used to innovate MBA experiences providing personal and professional development opportunities outside of classrooms. The Co-Curricular Innovation is acknowledged as the most fertile soil for quick, nimble and truly unique innovation due to the fact that there is less bureaucracy in co-curricular activities innovation. For instance, workshops designed to enhance personal and professional skills do not need to go through the lengthy curriculum approval process before they can be made available to a group of students. As such, an innovative and/or effective content and pedagogy can be implemented as they are developed, benefiting students in time for their job interviews before graduation. Yet, the impact of personal and professional development programs can be equally as profound, if not more, than the academics (Elliott and Fox, 2015).

Motivation for CSUEB's Co-Curricular Innovation

As previously mentioned, business programs need to do a better job in developing soft skills that employers value. This new emphasis on soft skills and intersecting academic engagement with professional engagement poses challenges and opportunities for a business program to be creative and flexible in offering opportunities for students of various background to effectively develop soft skills. The diverse student body as well as different core course instruction adds to the source of development gap and variation that needs to be addressed by the flexibility of the co-curricular programs, which can be offered as add-ons to different students as needed. Consistent with the aforementioned reason for Co-Curricular Innovation, CSUEB's MBA program looked into a flexible way to augment students' MBA learning experiences by providing additional opportunities for students to further develop and improve soft skills learned from classroom as value-added student services, which are optional but open to all graduate students.

The California State University, East Bay (CSUEB) is known to be one of the nation's most diverse higher education institutions. The profile of the University's MBA students reflects this much celebrated diversity, showing roughly equal representation of men and women in the program with the average age of thirty two. Approximately seventy percent of students have an average of six years of work experience. Nineteen different ethnic groups are represented in the four hundred total MBA student population including African American, Indian, Chinese,

European, Filipino, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Middle Eastern, Mongolian, Pakistani, Russian, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese, and others (<http://www.csueastbay.edu/cbe/mba-options/student-profile.html>) .

Reflecting the diverse backgrounds, CSUEB MBA students display varying degree of academic and professional development needs, which make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to address them all in the classroom through the core curriculum. In addition to diversity in students, instructors use different pedagogy in their approach to teaching/developing soft skills in their classrooms, which adds to the variation in MBA students' overall learning experiences. As noted previously, the lengthy and bureaucratic curriculum development process makes it difficult to incorporate effective soft skills pedagogy into the required core curriculum in such a way that ensures consistent delivery in a timely manner. The limitation of bureaucratic curriculum process coupled with the variations in students and instructors contributes to the sources of the gap between and among the importance, the outcomes, and the timely access to the opportunity to develop and enhance professional skills. In an effort to address these gaps, the CSUEB College of Business and Economics has been offering the Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services (VACCSS) to MBA students so that students can develop and improve their professional skills as needed in the area of their concerns, with the desired frequency in a timely manner, before they complete the program.

Listed in the following are a few motivating factors that pointed to the CSUEB's MBA Co-Curricular innovation as Value-Added student services:

Access: To make impactful learning experiences accessible to all MBA students both in topics and in pedagogy. Innovative teaching practices can be made available to all interested students in the form of professional development workshops.

Flexibility: To provide professional development opportunities to students in the areas of their needs. Students are motivated to build skill sets to fill their needs in a flexible, personalized, and engaging environment.

Continuous Improvement: To provide students an individual opportunity to close the loop in the Assurance of Learning Process. The flexible nature offers a channel for reinforcing student learning outcomes before students leave the program.

Timeliness: To facilitate timely introduction of the most needed areas of professional development on demand without having to impose on faculty with additional content or a new soft skill development pedagogy. In addition, the new content and pedagogy can be introduced as they are developed because the co-curricular student service workshops are not subjected to the University's curriculum procedure.

Student Service: To facilitate community of learning and professional development through enhanced student services.

Relationship Building: To connect students with the College's Administration and Graduate Programs Office.

The services are organized by the College's Graduate Programs Office as part of student services. The director of the program identifies the needs, plans workshop sessions, identifies instructors, works with instructors to develop sessions, and oversees the execution of workshops. The sources of the workshop the College's advisory board members. The workshops are offered on Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Two staff coordinators provide support through the process of event planning, communication, administration, and evaluation. Participants are provided both breakfast and lunch in all full day workshops. All value-added services workshops are funded by the College and offered to College's graduate students at no cost to them. The College's administrative leadership view this as an opportunity to communicate their commitment to student success.

The following section describes a series of Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services (VACCSS) introduced to CSUEB MBA students and discusses the benefits of each services to students, faculty, and the program.

Innovation, Engagement, and Impact of Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services Offered

In search of a specific topic of VACCSS activities, several sources provided valuable insights. The sources that contributed to determining workshop topics include the Program Outcomes Assessment data, student suggestions, employer input, and best practice instructions. The CSUEB College of Business and Economics introduced a series of VACCSS workshops from Fall 2013 to Spring 2017. They include the Leadership Communication Bootcamp I, Innovative Leadership and Design Thinking, Personal Branding and Social Media Networking, and Advanced Leadership Communication II. Participant feedback was obtained from each workshop offered in order to gauge the effectiveness of the VACCSS activity. The feedback instrument measured the level of satisfaction, the best takeaways, and other suggestions including interested workshop topics and areas for improvements. Reflecting the results of participant satisfaction survey, the summary of VACCSS activities are documented and presented in the

framework of innovation, engagement, and impact, following a brief description of each workshop in the next section.

Leadership Communication Bootcamp I

The CSUEB College of Business and Economics introduced its first Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Service in Fall 2013 with the MBA Leadership Communication Boot Camp. The primary purpose of this workshop was to provide MBA students an opportunity to improve on 'Oral Communication' skills which had been identified as a persisting area of improvement by the program assessment until Spring 2013. In addition, it was observed that students responded exceptionally well to the workshop type pedagogy of coaching and mentoring. The interactive communication skill building exercise, "Lead Through Inspiring Others," has been offered to MBA students on Saturdays as a full day immersion experience during Fall quarter since Fall 2013. Building upon the understanding of leadership communication principles, students are immersed in hands-on exercises to develop and enhance their communication skills. The purposes of the boot camp are to provide the opportunity to break the barrier in communication and to offer additional opportunity to practice the tools learned. A sample agenda for the boot camp include the following:

Authentic Leadership: Communication Principles; What Employees Want; Purpose of Theatre; Actor's Skills

About Me: What I want you to know about me is; My Communication Goal is; What's Holding me Back; My Legacy

The Tempest: Be Not Afear'd; The Isle is Full of Noises; Sounds and Sweet Airs; That Give Delight and Hurt Not

Story Telling for Leaders: Video; Story Telling Skills

Theatre Skills: Paired Walks; Discussions; Presentation

The session begins with a lecture and overview founded upon the theme of inspiring leadership and presence (Duarte, 2010; Halpern and Lubar, 2004). Student participants are exposed to instructions and case discussions, and walk through techniques and exercises designed to build eye contact, positive body language, theatre skills, active listening and inspiring story-telling. The Communication Boot Camp focuses on behavioral learning and resembles the interactive workshops that practitioners attend to strengthen their professional development. Participants are required to move around throughout the workshop and as such, the workshop requires a large, open space with flexible repositionable classroom furniture.

Throughout the session, students were mentored as a group, split into small groups, and coached individually. Three coaches were present to work with students. Table 1 presents a summary of engagement and impact of various workshops. As shown in the table, over 200 students participated in the Leadership Communication Boot Camp. The students' feedback on the boot camp experience was excellent (rating of 4.81 on a five point scale with 5 being "very satisfied"). Almost all participating students indicated appreciation for improvement in their skills and confidence in public speaking, listening and inspiring/connecting with others. The pedagogy used in the boot camp has been adopted in the MBA core course on Managerial Communication, since Fall 2014. The continuing success of the course led to development of a new MBA core course, Leadership Communication in Organizations, during the curriculum reform in the Quarter to Semester (Q to S) conversion process. The new course will take effect in Fall 2018.

Innovative Leadership and Design Thinking Workshop

Inspired by impactful student experiences in one of the MBA elective courses in Fall 2014, the College introduced the new workshop on "Leading to Innovate," in Winter 2015. The workshop engaged students through the Design Thinking process and helped them build innovative leadership skills. Use of the Design Thinking approach as the pedagogy to instill creativity not only accomplished the goal of teaching innovation skills but also offered the benefit of learning how to create mutual dependency for productive collaboration (Brown, 2008; 2015; Wagner, 2012). This Design Thinking workshop is offered once a year. The hands-on one day (Saturday) workshop includes in its agenda activities such as The Intrigue of Design Thinking, Marshmallow Project, Fun Exercise, RT Model, Wallet Project, Silly Cow Exercise, Ready Set Design, etc.

Table 1: Summary of Innovation, Engagement, and Impact of the Value Added Co-Curricular Student Services at CSUEB

Innovation		Engagement	Impact	
Workshop Title	Offerings	Attendance	Overall Satisfaction	Best Takeaways
Leadership Communication Bootcamp I	First offered in Fall 2013; offered once in the beginning of the Fall or Spring Quarter of each academic year to present	205	4.81	Connection made with peers; Listening, Connecting, and Story-telling; Confidence in public speaking; Confidence working with diverse cultural group; Positive energy; Body language, eye contact, and voice command; Presentation skills.
Innovative Leadership through Design Thinking	Launched in Winter 2015; offered in Winter Quarter	55	4.85	Empathy for human centered design; Team building - learning to collaborate; Design Thinking principles and process; New perspective on 'failing', fail early fail often; Rapid prototyping; Networking
Advanced Leadership Communication Bootcamp II	Launched in Spring 2017	27	4.91	Trust building; PERMA; Connecting with others; Communication skills - listening; Communication - expressing myself; Inspirational leadership; Leadership skills.
Personal Branding and Social Media Networking	Launched in Spring 2014; offered in Spring quarter	123	4.85	Confidence in job search; How to use Social Media (SM) to brand myself; How to manage my SM; How to use SM to look for a job; Updated resume; Optimized LinkedIn profile; Using SM tools to boost my online presence; Feedback on my resume; How to brand myself.

The workshop is noted to be of high value with 4.85 out of 5 mark in overall satisfaction. One notable valuable outcome of the workshop was reported to be learning to build 'empathy', appreciate 'rapid prototyping', engage in the process of relevant innovation, and to collaborate in so doing. Inspired by student suggestions, courses in marketing and entrepreneurship have adopted Design Thinking as a pedagogy to help students engage in collaborative exercises and facilitate the use of Design Thinking as a process to innovate. In addition, per the curriculum reform of the Quarter to Semester conversion, a couple of new courses in Management have been developed incorporating the topic of Design Thinking, effective Fall 2018.

Personal Branding and Social Media Networking

In Spring 2014, the College began offering one day workshop on Personal Branding through Social Networking, which was designed to help MBA students jump-start their future career path. The goal was to help students develop their personal professional brand and to deploy their social media networking strategy. The deliverables of the workshop were the development of their personal brand profile and its launch in their new or revised LinkedIn profile. The agenda of this action packed workshop included: The Importance of Networking; One-on-One Resume Reviews; Defining YOUR Online Brand; Creating a Perfect "Digital Handshake" on LinkedIn; Networking on LinkedIn; Creating and Protecting Your Online Personal Brand and E-Reputation; and "Make it Happen!"

Participants leave with a complete LinkedIn profile and feedback for a polished resume. This career development workshop is offered once a year. Students' responses to this workshop has been phenomenal. Participants highly appreciate the tangible outcomes of the workshop that give them more confidence in their pursuit of personal branding and professional networking through social media. As shown in the Table 2, the demand for this workshop has been growing and it opens doors to other on- and in- demand career development workshops such as 'Negotiating for Salary', 'Professional Networking', and 'Conflict Resolution', etc. The College has launched a new Career Development Center, which has been carrying on some of the popular career development workshop topics in their new service to students. In terms of its impact on the curricular development, it validated the importance and the relevance of a new MBA core course on "Negotiation", which will take effect in Fall 2018.

Advanced Leadership Communication—Boot Camp II

In Spring 2017, encouraged by the pedagogy used in one of the MBA core courses, Executive Leadership, the College's Graduate Programs Office launched a new advanced level of Communication Boot Camp designed to help students build skills for effective leadership such as motivating, persuading, coaching, and developing others. This workshop is considered a continuation of The Leadership Communication Boot Camp I. This workshop can be used to train the trainers (i.e., coaches). The potential impact of this workshop can be that it would enable the College to scale the 'coaching' pedagogy as we envision expanding the effective workshop methods to other areas including undergraduate business majors, other non-business students, alumni, and external constituents in the community at large. It may further enable the College to engage various constituents and to make a notable impact in the diverse community of our service.

CONCLUSION

The Impact of the Value-Added Co-Curricular Student Services (VACCSS)

In total, the VACCSS generated over 400 cases of engaged participation in a series of professional development workshops since its first launch in Fall 2013. This service was offered to students at no additional cost as an expression of the College's commitment to student success. One of the most important benefits has been that the VACCSS helped CBE to reinforce our efforts to create an innovative and engaged learning environment, to communicate the culture of student-centeredness, and to connect the students with the College administration. It should be noted that all students participated in the VACCSS activities showed a very high level of satisfaction with and appreciation for the College administration as well as faculty and staff. For example, the recent Princeton Review survey of 'Student Says' reflects on the students' appreciation of this service offered by the College administration.

In addition, the VACCSS provided a channel for the MBA program to help students strengthen the areas that needed to be reinforced, catering to students with need for additional practice opportunities. Furthermore, the flexible nature of the VACCSS opens doors to a wide variety of developmental topics and areas that are desired by students, many of which are also desired highly by employers. Table 2 presents a summary of student suggestions and a list of desired topics for future VACCSS innovation. It is encouraging to note that participating students demand more of the same types of workshops for their continuous development. Additionally, students would like more topics added such as 'Networking', 'Negotiating for Salary and Benefits', 'Excel', 'Conflict Resolution', 'Influencing Others', 'Interviewing', and 'Presentation', etc.

Furthermore, because of the flexibility and the low barriers to introduction and attendance, the VACCSS facilitates the diffusion of innovative teaching and learning to instructors as well as to students. It availed the impactful learning experience to a large number of students in a short time. Moreover, the VACCSS have a potential to scale its access to different types and even greater number of constituents. For example, the Communication Boot Camp and its innovative pedagogy have also been expanded to and made available to undergraduate students in the form of the 'Jump-Start' workshop, which is a two full day workshop offered to newly joining undergraduate students. In addition, many non-business major students have expressed their desire to attend and benefit from the workshops and courses that use effective workshop style pedagogy, which are offered by the College.

As to its impact on curriculum innovation, the success stories of VACCSS facilitate buy-in of faculty in the process of curriculum revision and encourages the consideration of introducing or adopting innovative instructional approaches and pedagogies. The VACCSS may be used as a channel to connect valued student services with

classrooms by serving as an incubator for developing and assuring impactful instructional contents and methods. Furthermore, when aligned with the required curriculum, co-curricular activities can be considered effective “closing of the loop” actions in the process of Assurance of Learning (AACSB, 2013).

Table 2: Summary of Student Suggestions for Future Development

Innovation		Suggestions for Future	
Workshop	Offerings	Suggested future workshops	Comments/Suggestions
Leadership Communication Bootcamp I	First offered in Fall 2013; offered once in the beginning of the Fall or Spring Quarter of each academic year since Fall 2013	Networking; Presentation; leadership training; Career development; Job search; resume; Job interview skills; Power Point, Excel, Data Visualization, Graphics; Other soft skills; Time management and organization skills; Teamwork	Great start to the quarter; Perfect timing at the beginning; More of the same workshop; More opportunities to practice.
Innovative Leadership through Design Thinking	Launched in Winter 2015; offered in Winter Quarter	Leadership; Coaching; People management; Networking	More opportunities to practice Design Thinking; Should be a required MBA core; Excellent tool for creating dependency in teamwork facilitating collaboration; A must for teambuilding exercise
Advanced Leadership Communication Bootcamp II	Launched in Spring 2017	Conflict Resolution; Excel; Growing self-confidence; Leadership-influencing others.	More opportunities to practice; more exercises for coaching and influencing.
Personal Branding and Social Media Networking	Launched in Spring 2014; offered in Spring quarter	Networking; Social Media Marketing; Excel; Presentation; Writing; Power Point presentation; Negotiating for salary and Benefits; Interviewing; Career Development Topics - interview , career advice/strategy.	More/deeper engagement in personal branding; Should be offered more often (e.g., every 4 months); Smaller session size would be more desirable for more individual attention from the coaches.

Externally, the VACCSS innovation enabled the CSUEB College of Business and Economics participate in the AACSB’s call for “Innovation that Inspire” in 2015. The CSUEB VACCSS is presented as one of 350 programs that responded to this call. In addition, the practice of Co-Curricular innovation was recognized in the CEO magazine, helping the CSUEB MBA program placed among the “Tier 1” programs per the ranking of the Europe based magazine targeted to business practitioners. In closing, the student service innovation experience reported has been rewarding to both the students and the College. Business education programs are encouraged to engage in Co-curricular innovation activities in the form of Value-Added Student Services. The student service channel can and should be as an active participant in delivering quality business education that offers a relevant balance of academic and professional development.

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