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THE QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMONS
for HIGHER *and* POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Faculty Employability Fellows Impact Project

Enhancing and Integrating the Communication Skills of Business School Students

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Gainful employment is a major motivator for students and families as they consider the value of higher education. Increased accountability and decreased funding for many public institutions complicates this issue. The “value” of higher education has recently been questioned by many. Employability is an expectation of many students, families, and employers. Dr. Lee Ferrell and Dr. Amanada Lawrence put forth that higher education, as an industry, must continue to assess and articulate this within our programs and graduates.

In an attempt to better respond to this, Drs Ferrell and Lawrence completed various employability scans (at national/statewide, local, and campus levels). Their findings suggest that while the University of Kentucky has much to be proud of in the area of employability, there is still room to grow. There is still a gap in the skills demonstrated by students and those sought by employers. Many of these skills are essential employability skills. They can be more difficult to demonstrate, but they can be taught/learned..

The goal of their Impact Project is to enhance and integrate the communication skills of business school students. As Drs Ferrell and Lawrence hold current positions under different Colleges, this project demonstrates how Colleges can work together to create such experiences for students.

OPPORTUNITY:

The **articulation and assessment of skills** are critical areas of a focus on employability. Many of the skills that employers seek are not automatically integrated into our traditional curriculums and/or are difficult to assess. Articulating these skills to students and employers is

necessary. Drs Ferrell and Lawrence believe faculty should acknowledge when these moments of integration happen to prepare students to articulate them to employers. Additionally, it is easier for many programs and graduates to demonstrate technical skills, but the essential skills are what employers often seek/have trouble finding in graduates.

Another concern or potential gap worth noting is the **opportunity for training**. Dr Ferrell and Dr. Lawrence’s findings suggest that many employers find great value in cooperative education and/or internship experiences. It is plausible to consider that some of the value gained in those assignments is related to employability skills. Integrating these experiences into our curriculum and/or (on a smaller scale) into our classrooms could be of great value to the masses. These findings guide our decisions to make the proposals found in this project.

SOLUTIONS & PROPOSALS

Solution #1 – Creation of a Culminating Experience Course

Part of this project has resulted in the creation of Business & Economics course 400 (B&E 400), a culminating experience course that will be piloted as a special topics course in the Fall 2020 semester. B&E 400 allows for a more integrated approach to assessment of the College’s common Student Learning Outcomes, as well as the major-specific outcomes. The College’s common Student Learning Outcomes can be tied to the QA Commons’ [Essential Employability Qualities](#) (EEQs), and will be taught and evaluated in a more intentional manner in B&E 400. While the EEQ’s are truly infused throughout the curriculum of the various programs (Accounting being one that has achieved EEQ Certification), the idea is to assess mastery of these EEQs in the culminating or capstone course. The linkage between the College Student Learning Outcomes & the EEQs can be seen below:

Gatton College Student Learning Outcome	EEQs Covered
Learning Outcome 1: Critical Thinking	Thinkers & Problem Solvers; Adaptable
Learning Outcome 2: Quantitative Reasoning	Learners; Thinkers & Problem Solvers
Learning Outcome 3: Ethical Reasoning	Principled & Ethical; Responsible & Professional
Learning Outcome 4: Communication	Communicators; Inquirers
Learning Outcome 5: Teamwork	Collaborators
Learning Outcome 6: Major Specific	Learners

Solution #2 – Piloting of a Course Sequence targeting different facets of employability, professionalism, and communication

Drs Ferrell and Lawrence have developed a set of proposals to achieve the below listed goals:

- Guide prospective students in exploring their major interest areas, and career paths around those major interest areas.
- Help students identify personal strengths and skills early, and learn how to communicate said strengths and skills.

- Foster an environment in which students can explore the job and internship markets early, and engage in these markets with employers, recruiters, and other relevant stakeholders.
- Position students to enhance their communication skills earlier than in previous curricular paths, with intentional modeling of the curriculum, by which students are prepared in entry-level coursework for communication courses, and these skills are integrated in a culminating experience before graduation.

The piloting of a three-course sequence (each course one credit hour) that targets different facets of employability, professionalism, and communication is proposed. The proposals are:

1. Expose B&E students early to major exploration

Initiation of a new course, B&E 150, into the curriculum for all students with a major in the College of Business & Economics in their first year.

Traditionally, B&E students do not take classes in the College of Business & Economics until their second or sophomore year. The only interaction they have with the College in their first year is with their advisors. B&E 150 promotes major exploration, and how the students can connect their aspirations and career goals to majors, programs, and certificates within the College, and align them more correctly. This course empowers students to take greater ownership of their education, truly explore the major opportunities, and make an informed decision of best fit.

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level, and is now a course offering for Fall 2020. Further approval will be needed to sequence this course, and the proposal is currently with the Faculty Senate for approval.

2. Introduce employable skills earlier, in the second year

Initiation of a new course, B&E 300, into the curriculum for all students with a major in the College of Business & Economics, to be taken in the second or sophomore year.

Students are directed in this course to explore internship and career paths allotted to them in the context of their major(s). Students are exposed to career-seeking strategies, and are able to practice interviewing and developing critical employability documentation (such as resumes and cover letters). Students are exposed to up-and-coming technology, providing a leg-up in the job market. (This course is being piloted as an Apple Classroom, by product of the multi-year partnership between Apple and The University of Kentucky.)

This proposal is inspired, in part, by the observation that students often prolong their participation in CIS 300, which teaches crucial employability and business communication skills, until it is too late in their academic career

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level, and is now a course offering for Fall 2020. Further approval will be needed to sequence this course, and the proposal is currently with the Faculty Senate for approval.

3. Provide a culminating experience for all Business & Economics majors

The initiation of a new course, B&E 400, into the curriculum for all students with a major in the College of Business & Economics, to be taken in the final year.

In this course, students will participate in simulations and real-world scenarios that will call on them to utilize and integrate the skills they have acquired over the tenure of their academic careers in the College of Business & Economics. Students will be placed in multi-disciplinary teams with other students representing the College's five majors, as well as various minors and certificate programs

This course will build off the skills gained in CIS 300 and will also streamline assessment for the College of Business' Assurance of Student Learning for AACSB accreditation.

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level, and is planned for Fall of 2021. Further approval is needed for this course to be offered, and the proposal is currently with Faculty Senate for approval. Further approval will also be needed to sequence this course, and the proposal is currently with Faculty Senate for approval.

4. Create a three-course required sequence using Proposals 1-3

Establishment of a three-course sequence for students who are majors in the College of Business & Economics with B&E 150, 300, and 400. This will allow for multiple intentional touch points with students and their exploration of employability.

At the end of this sequence, students will be able to more confidently communicate about the skills that make them more employable to their employers, and intentionally insert those skills on the market and in places of employer demand.

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level, and is planned to be in effect for fall of 2021. Further approval will be needed to approve B&E 400 and sequence the courses, and these proposals are currently with Faculty Senate for approval.

5. Allow for a more intentional and timely placement of Business Communication in the curricular path

More intentional and timely placement of the Business Communication course (CIS 300) in the curricular path for B&E students is proposed.

With the more rigid sequence of B&E 150, 300, and 400, students will likely have to complete CIS 300 before their final year of undergraduate education, when the content of the course would be deemed “too late.” This will optimize the utility of CIS 300, preparing students for its content in B&E 300, and bringing those skills back in to put them in a business context in B&E 400.

Currently, more than 75% of students take CIS 300 in their final year, and an alarming portion of these students take the course in their final semester. The proposals preceding this one will create change.

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level, and is planned to be in effect by August 1, 2021, pending approval of the other proposals.

6. Create positions to teach in the three-course sequence and mentor students

Creation of three new staff/faculty positions to teach in the 3-course sequence and mentor students is proposed.

These new positions will serve as 12-month administrative faculty, who will bring in their expertise from the field and inform their practice in the classroom. Through the proposed new courses, these faculty will engage with every student in the College of Business & Economics (for reference, B&E graduates 900-1000 students in total each year). These new employees will collaborate with the five academic departments, as well as the student support units within the College (i.e., Career Center).

This proposal has been supported by the academic deans, is approved at the Associate Dean level and positions will be posted pending approval of B&E 400.

Funds have been secured for at least two positions, and these positions are likely to be hired sometime in the Fall of 2020.

IMPACT

Each of the eight EEQs have been mapped to the six proposals. Drs Ferrell and Lawrence show that “introduction,” “reinforcement,” and “mastery” are covered for each EEQ through the series of proposals.

The intended outcomes for the set of proposals are:

- Utilizing early major exploration:

- 80% of first-year majors in the College of Business & Economics will move from the Exploratory major to a major department within their first year.
- 80% of students moved into pre-majors or a major department will be accepted into the full major within the first year.
- Students will exhibit enhanced communication skills. This objective will be assessed through the standard assessment of the College's "Communication" Student Learning Outcome in CIS 300.
- At least 60% of undergraduate students with a major in the College of Business & Economics will participate in an internship, following their second year of college (and following participation in both B&E 150 and B&E 300).
- Students will be able to better-integrate their foundational and multidisciplinary business backgrounds through comprehensive exam assessment in B&E 400. At least 70% of students will score 70% or higher on each section competency (tied to the EEQs of the Quality Assurance Commons) of the AACSB Assessment Plan.
- Graduates of the College of Business & Economics will be placed with employers at a rate of 75% by the time of graduation, and at a rate of 85% within 6 months of graduation.
- More informally, area employers will rate in the first year of implementation that they have seen an improvement in their employees (our graduates) in terms of their communication skills.

The Impact Project demonstrates how to make meaningful change in our College(s) (and in the context of the larger University). This plan will impact approximately 1000 new students each year. When fully in place, it will impact all B&E undergraduate students (approximately 4500-5000).