

ACCOUNTING STUDENTS AND THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE

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Student retention and appropriate academic preparation of graduates are two areas of concern for many universities. The issues of attracting and retaining high quality students are of particular importance for accounting programs because of demands from the profession for well-qualified accounting graduates. Accrediting agencies are also concerned about the ability of schools to attract and retain high quality graduates. For example, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) states in its Participants Standards: Standard 7 (Student Retention) that schools must have “academic standards and retention practices that produce high quality graduates” (AACSB 2008). Zucca and McFall Jr. (2008) indicate that, even though interest in accounting careers has increased in recent years, the demand for highly qualified students exceeds the supply and that this trend will continue into the future. Accounting programs are faced with the challenge of attracting high quality students and then retaining these students to graduation.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a Business Freshman Year Experience course designed to provide students with the opportunity to interact with professors and professionals in their intended field of study and to integrate them into the university and into their major very early in their experience. Students write a series of essays about topics presented in the course. For the final essay, students are asked to indicate what they learned in the course and how their perspectives on majoring in a business discipline have changed. Results of analysis of these final essays are presented.

BACKGROUND

Several previous studies have indicated factors that affect student retention and academic success. Common themes in these studies stress the importance of integration into the university, interactions with faculty and other professionals in the discipline, and involvement with other students.

In a paper that describes a university’s efforts to recruit and retain high quality accounting students, Zucca and McFall Jr. (2008) enumerate the following characteristics and experiences that improve student retention: 1) higher academic performance and achievement, 2) social and intellectual integration into the university, 3) institutional commitment through residential life, classroom experiences and faculty interaction, 4) early commitment to a major, and 5) voluntary involvement in freshman orientation courses.

Tinto (1987) argues that the most effective retention strategy for universities is to teach students how to learn. He provides six principles for first year success and retention, which include: 1) students should have the opportunity to acquire the skills for academic success, 2) personal contact with students should extend beyond academic life, 3) retention actions should be systematic, 4) these actions should address students’ needs early in the academic year, 5) they should be student-centered, and 6) they should have education as their goal.

Cox, et al (2005) describe a freshman level course designed to develop skills for academic success, ease student transition from high school to college, provide a community for students, improve retention and academic performance, and provide a realistic preview of the business school and the business curriculum. They identify four factors that are important in the

promotion of academic success and retention. These are: 1) early and frequent interaction with faculty, staff, and peers; 2) clearly communicated academic expectations and requirements; 3) learning opportunities that increase involvement with other students; and 4) academic, social, and personal support.

The Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) (1992) specifically indicates that early courses in accounting shape students' perceptions of 1) the profession, 2) the aptitudes and skills needed for successful careers in accounting, and 3) the nature of career opportunities in accounting.

THE FRESHMAN YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSE

In response to the recommendations of the above-mentioned studies and other studies that indicate the use of a freshman year experience course can significantly improve student retention and academic success (Cox, et al 2005; Murtaugh, et al 1999; Lamb, et al 1997; Chonko and Roberts 1996; and Crutchfield and Eveland 2008), a medium-sized Midwestern university (the University) has addressed issues of retention and academic success by implementing a three-pronged Freshman Year Experience (FYE) sequence. This program requires freshmen business majors to take a University level FYE course, a School of Business FYE course, and an alcohol and drug awareness course concurrently during their first semester at the University. The courses are designed and organized to address both the students' socialization and integration issues and their needs to develop strategies and skills for academic success.

The Business FYE course was designed by the School of Business Curriculum Committee with the charge from the Dean and the Dean's Advisory Board that the course should focus on student retention, easing student transition into the University, student integration into the School of Business during their first year, exposure to University and department expectations regarding academic performance, and providing students with information concerning career opportunities in the different business disciplines. The course meets for one 50-minute session each week and six sessions are used to cover the academic disciplines of accounting, finance, marketing, management, international business, and entrepreneurship. There were five sections with no more than 25 students per section. Many of the speakers are university alumni who introduce students to local and regional career opportunities and explain specifics about how their business degree applies to their professional lives. Some of these sessions also include School of Business faculty members, further stressing the connection between the various academic disciplines and career opportunities. Students also complete short writing assignments related to course content and presentations by guest speakers in the class. The course is not designed strictly for accounting majors, but provides all students interested in business majors an overview of majors, skills needed to be successful in each of the majors, and career opportunities in each field of study. A course such as this could provide an accounting program with the opportunity to recruit and retain students who may not initially consider an accounting major. A brief course outline is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Course Outline for Business FYE Course

Week	Course Topic	Assignment
1	Introduction to Course	None
2	School of Business Academic Advisor/ Degree Plan	Paper discussing what student learned about the University Dragon Core (general education requirements)
3	Career Services/Study Abroad Program	Information about internship and study abroad programs from University webpage; list of questions for guest speakers
4	Campus business clubs/ professional organizations	None
5	Speakers from the Marketing profession	Essay on search of marketing as an academic emphasis
6	Speakers from the Accounting profession	Essay on search of accounting as an academic emphasis
7	Speakers from the Finance profession	Essay on search of finance as an academic emphasis
8	Speakers from the Management profession	Essay on search of management as an academic emphasis
9	Personal and professional ethics	Passport due: Paper summarizing an interview with a professional in the student's field of study
10	What employers want in employees	Essay on what you think employers are looking for in the student's intended field of study
11	Speakers from employment agency	Essay: Why is it important to have personal and professional integrity?
12	Degree plan	First draft of degree plan for studies at the University
13	Entrepreneurship and leadership	Final degree plan
14	Speakers from International Business professions	Essay on search of international business as an academic emphasis
15	Course wrap-up; brainstorming about future FYE courses	Essay on what student learned in FYE course; how student perspective on a business major has changed

The final essay assignment for the semester asks the students to describe what they learned in the FYE course and to discuss how their perspectives on majoring in a business discipline have changed. Students are required to discuss at least three items or issues. These essays provide a great deal of insight into student perceptions of the course and how they feel about the University and the School of Business. The authors read the 51 essays and categorized student responses into themes, which are summarized in Table 2 below. Responses that emerged seemed to fall under three main headings: building skills for entrance into the work force, building skills for and connections with the University, and building connections with the business community. These themes correspond to several factors mentioned in the literature which relate to student retention and which therefore are desired outcomes of an FYE course. (Zucca and McFall Jr., 2008; Cox, et al 2005; AECC, 1992). Students indicate that they understand the value of internships in providing on the job training for future employment. They also learned about the value of networking and resume building in the job search process. Many students indicated in their essays that class projects, such as the degree plan and the passport project, helped them understand their major (and other business majors) better. Responses of 32 students indicated that the guest speakers were very helpful in helping them learn about the variety of careers available in the business field. These student responses will be used to plan for future sections of the FYE course.

Table 2: Themes from Final Student Essays

Topic	
Building Skills for Entrance into the Work Force	
Value of internship (on –the-jobskills acquisition)	13
Hiring process; interviewing skills; what employers are looking for	9
Value of clubs & getting involved in extra acts (for leadership & communication skills)	7
People networking skills	6
How to better my resume	5
Importance of marketing yourself to get a job	5
Interplay of personality, real life experience, and interests in choosing a major	4
Building Connections to and Skills for the University	
Breadth of business education/variety of majors	13
Degree plan deepened understanding for amount of work and courses to graduate	13
Deepened understanding of major (confirmed, or deterred)	8
Class projects helped me learn more about major; got to know peers	7
Expanded understanding of core classes	5
Mistakenly expected business degree to be fast, easy, anyone can do it	3
Too many speakers/speakers not told what topic to speak on/spoke over heads	3
Business FYE is much better than University wide FYE	2
Changing major, getting job in area not your major (avoid narrow niche) might be OK	2
Very practical, real life, and useful information	1
More computer classes are needed than I thought	??
Building Connections to the Business Community	
Variety of business careers (Speakers were very helpful)	32
Importance of academic & professional integrity/ business ethics	6
Expanded understanding of the different business areas (mgmt, mktg, fin, etc)	2
Expanded understanding of different methods of customer interaction	1
Interview assignment enjoyable	1
Professionals not decided when enter job force	1

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper briefly described a Business Freshman Year Experience course at a Midwestern University. The course is designed to provide students with the opportunity to build connections with professors and professionals in their intended field of study and to integrate them into the university and into their major very early in their collegiate experience. Students write a series of essays about topics presented in the course. Analysis of their final essays showed an overall satisfying student experience in FYE. Students’ responses indicated that they experienced opportunities to build skills and to build connections. The skills were in the area of

successful academic performance and in successful entrance into the work force. Connections were built with faculty and with the business community. These connections were developed through an expanded understanding of the University's and the business community's expectations of future graduates, and an expanded understanding of the vast career opportunities available within the selected business majors. Almost all of the students indicated that Business FYE was an extremely helpful and useful course. This course can be used as a vehicle for accounting programs to recruit and retain high-quality students.

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