

# INTEGRATING MENTORSHIP IN A WORKPLACE-INTEGRATED LEARNING CURRICULUM

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*When instructing and supporting Business Degree students through work-integrated learning (WIL) courses, instructors noted high technical skill competence, but less preparedness pertaining to interpersonal and professional interactions. The inability to effectively navigate relationships and workplace contexts could impact the perceived competence of the student/employee. In increasingly dynamic and challenging workplaces, a graduate's breadth of skills within both interpersonal and technical competencies are critically important. In this paper, we describe experiences and conditions related to the re-design and implementation of the Practicum and Capstone courses. Both utilize the integration of mentorship in curriculum to increase the learning, development, and experience of soon-to-be graduates. This approach may be an effective method to support students through the transition from post-secondary to the workplace more successfully. This paper considers the effectiveness of the re-design and the future of the related work.*

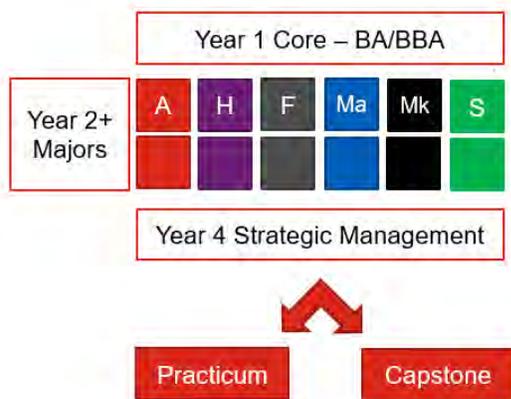
This evaluation of a course re-design is considered in the context of a polytechnic institution in a baccalaureate undergraduate degree program in business. The curriculum is intended to expose students to work-place relevant skills and situations through applied learning and problem-based experiences. Experiences are encouraged to be developed using industry relevant problems and necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies. Although the authors examine the effectiveness within a business degree program, it would be conceivable to suggest relevance across a variety of disciplines that prepare graduates for workplace readiness.

In the diploma and degree programs, students complete a common first year of ten courses in a consistent cohort. At the end of the first year, students select a prerequisite for one of six majors (accounting, human resources, financial services, management, marketing, and supply chain). Students then navigate the next two years of coursework highly tied to others within the same major. In the final stages of their degree, all students finish with strategic management and a six-credit-hour work-integrated learning (WIL) culminating course (choice of either Practicum or Capstone; a visualization of the typical course pathway and progression through this degree is presented in Figure 1). Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a priority at this applied-learning institution with a focus on impactful teaching and learning strategies. Using the operational definition by Cooper et al. (2010), WIL is “the intersection and engagement of theoretical and practice learning; the process of bringing together formal learning and productive work, or theory and practice.” (p. xiii). These culminating experiences are intended to bridge the pathway to the workplace through mentored readiness development and transition from institutional learning to practice. The instructor is positioned to coach and mentor the student through challenges, rather than just solely assess.

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**Figure 1**

*Bachelor of Business Administration General Degree Course Pathway*



*Note:* This is the mapping that depicts a general course pathway (time represented through progress from top to bottom of figure) in the selected BBA degree. Year 2+ majors include: Accounting (A), Human Resources (H), Financial Services (F), Management (Ma), Marketing (Mk), and Supply Chain (S). The final component in a choice of WIL culmination options between Practicum or Capstone to complete degree requirements. Students cannot select either Practicum or Capstone until at least 90 credits of the 120 credits required for the degree have been completed.

Faculty instructors are selected to the institution as well as to Practicum and Capstone based on practitioner expertise and a focus on industry and the workplace. As lead instructors in Practicum and Capstone courses, the authors identified through their own experiences and dialogue with colleagues, students, and industry leaders that graduates had high technical skill competence but noted perceived lack or lesser preparedness pertaining to interpersonal and professional interaction skills. If graduates are not able to effectively navigate the relationships and workplace contexts, this could significantly impact the perception of overall competence held by the applicant or employee. As the workplace becomes increasingly dynamic and complex, a graduate’s skill competencies are even more critical to career success. Students encounter a range of situations and can utilize conversations and feedback with the instructors for mentorship and strategies through unfamiliar or challenging circumstances.

When instructing and supporting students through Practicum and Capstone course experiences, we propose an iteration of integrating mentorship into this WIL curriculum. This paper is a reflexive narrative of the process, outcomes, and next steps of design and implementation using a case study of Practicum and Capstone courses. It utilizes the integration of mentorship in curriculum to increase the learning, development, and experience of soon-to-be graduates. This approach may be an effective method to support students through the transition from postsecondary to the workplace more successfully.

## Framework

It is worth acknowledging that good practice in undergraduate education (highlighting the seminal work of Chickering & Gamson, 1991, 1999) encouraged student-faculty contact, encourages cooperation among students, encourages active learning, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. The role of the instructor in this case, is to extend beyond providing lecture and content and guide students through the gauntlet of analysis, trial, validation, and a combination of success and failure. Lunsford et al. (2017) highlighted the range of desired outcomes through the formal and informal mentorship of undergraduates to be: grade point average, persistence in higher education, leadership skills, and cognitive and socio-emotional growth (p.327). Lunsford (2021) offered an analysis of the mentoring ecosystem with “a framework for thinking about the influences on [the] mentoring of participants and programs” (p.31-32). Examined in the model are the complexities of the interactions or mentoring episodes that engage a mentoring relationship over time. Although this presentation-informed paper focused on the mentorship of faculty to students in strengthening workplace readiness, there are elements that deserve further consideration and research including the peer-to-peer dynamics, as well as the gains experienced by faculty.

## Practicum Story (Challenges and Current State)

The business Practicum course is a unique course which requires students to find a work position within their field of study and complete 450 hours of work, alongside additional coursework. The work position and related hours of work are course requirements but are not graded. There are two focus areas within the graded coursework: human skills (awareness and development of the individual student’s interpersonal skills; often referred to as *soft* skills) and technical skills. Both skillsets connect to the professional work environment and are designed to enhance the student experience and provide additional value to the employer.

In the past, the course had assignments aligned to technical skill assessments, which are like those used in the current design. There was an ungraded coaching session which was poorly attended and unstructured. Instructors involved in the course shared their coaching experiences and agreed that students who utilized the opportunity to discuss their workplace transition and related concerns, reported the session being helpful in navigating their transition from student to professional.

After identifying the possible value of a more structured approach to supporting the student transition to professional work, a team of instructors attempted to address the problem and create a more balanced and student-centric course with an intentional coaching and mentorship model. Changes to the course were recently piloted and will be analyzed for impacts and design iterations in the future.

The technical aspect of the coursework remains the same and involves students exploring both a strategic and an operational issue related to their organization. As a result, they provide two robust reports to their employer. The human skills element comprises three parts. The first is the addition of Insights Discovery personality assessment tool and a full day ‘orientation’ to ensure students can effectively apply the personality assessment to their workplace. The three aims of the session are: to better understand their own needs and communication preferences and those of others, to adapt their communication style to connect and collaborate effectively with

others and to use these skills to overcome conflict in the workplace (Insights Discovery, 2021). Students often require significant support to develop confidence in the process of connecting problem identification, rationale, and creating an approach for analysis and presentation to stakeholders and decision makers.

The second part involves the students attending a one-on-one coaching session with their instructor to invite a mentorship relationship. In this structured session the student comes prepared to discuss their situation at work, including relationships, communication, and conflicts. The session has an output of three SMART goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ssignable, **R**ealistic, **T**ime-related; Doran, 1981) which the student focuses on for the duration of the Practicum. The session has structure but is designed to be flexible and address student needs as they arise. There is often time within the session to provide some additional insight into the student's Insights Discovery profile and to ensure they are using the tool as an additional resource for building relationships and connecting with others (Insights Discovery, 2021).

This coaching session and goal setting are concluded in a final evaluation reflective assignment, which the students complete at the end of the course. It is an overview of the entire experience and asks them to consider their goals and the application of the information they received in the orientation session. Students often seek mentorship from the practicum instructor on strategies and insights to be reflected upon.

Finally, there are three graded discussions which occur throughout the course which encourage the students to apply their personality related learnings to the workplace and share experiences. These keep the student's focus balanced between work, the technical assignments, and the human side of the course. These coordinated components help to provide insights to the practicum instructor to provide specific and individual approaches for support for student development.

### **Capstone Story (Challenges and Current State)**

This six-credit hour team-based course integrates students from the six majors back into multidisciplinary teams. Students can work as a consulting team with pre-screened business owners or company decision makers or validate and prepare for the launch of a start-up business. The curriculum is intended to expose students to work-place relevant situations through WIL experiences. Industry-partnered projects are developed using relevant problems and necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies, while being supported by decision makers in the company. Students are expected to be able to integrate the complexities of creating and analyzing business solutions to address actual problems alongside industry experts. The Capstone instructors serve to coach and mentor student groups through this process as it is novel to most students outside of theoretical or controlled experiences to be engaged in real business problems.

Previous iterations of this course resulted in students completing large business plan documents. It was a challenge to achieve actionable recommendations and implementation plans within a 15-week semester. In addition, students struggled to identify skill sets that were utilized or developed throughout the course, and new graduates and employers indicate strengthened workplace readiness through surveys for new employment after graduation. In the most recent iteration of Capstone design, areas of concerns that were identified were: a) **Students** did not want a textbook but demanded resources, they did not want lecture but demanded structure, and they wanted flexibility but were fixated on the structure of graded components; b) **Faculty** needed manageable projects, flexible curriculum to allow for valuable mentorship personalized

to the needs of groups, and support for various modalities for execution (foresight that was helpful when the COVID-19 shutdown in March 2020 required quick transition to online learning from the campus-based classroom); c) *Graduates and employers* completing new graduate surveys identified workplace readiness challenges and a lack of student experiences the developed and encouraged agency, critical thinking, and real problem impacts.

Mindset and foundational knowledge were the first two criteria addressed. This was initiated through the requirement for students to complete seven LinkedIn Learning certificates across the topics of growth mindset, effective listening, design thinking (IDEOU, 2021; IBM, 2021), and innovation. This orients the students to the consistent language and expectations of course content regarding industry-relevant concepts. It also ensures students have a professional profile on LinkedIn (required to do LinkedIn Learning courses), access to industry leaders, resources for future professional development, and an increased searchability within automated job searches. Gauthier (2020) explored the value of microcredentials from the employer's perspective and posited that "as the industry credential market changes to align with contemporary skills and knowledge, employers look to postsecondary institutions to update their programs to match industry requirements" (p.6).

Due to the specialized nature of technical courses throughout a student's major of study, students come to this final WIL experience focused on their major rather than on the integration of skills to solve complex business problems. This dynamic nearly always requires faculty to mentor team members to foster recognition of diverse perspectives and develop collaborative solutions. There is also a process and need to foster trust between the student and instructor as the students are being asked to step out of the comfort of a confined course and take ownership and accountability to work within the much more uncertainty of the real problems they are engaged within.

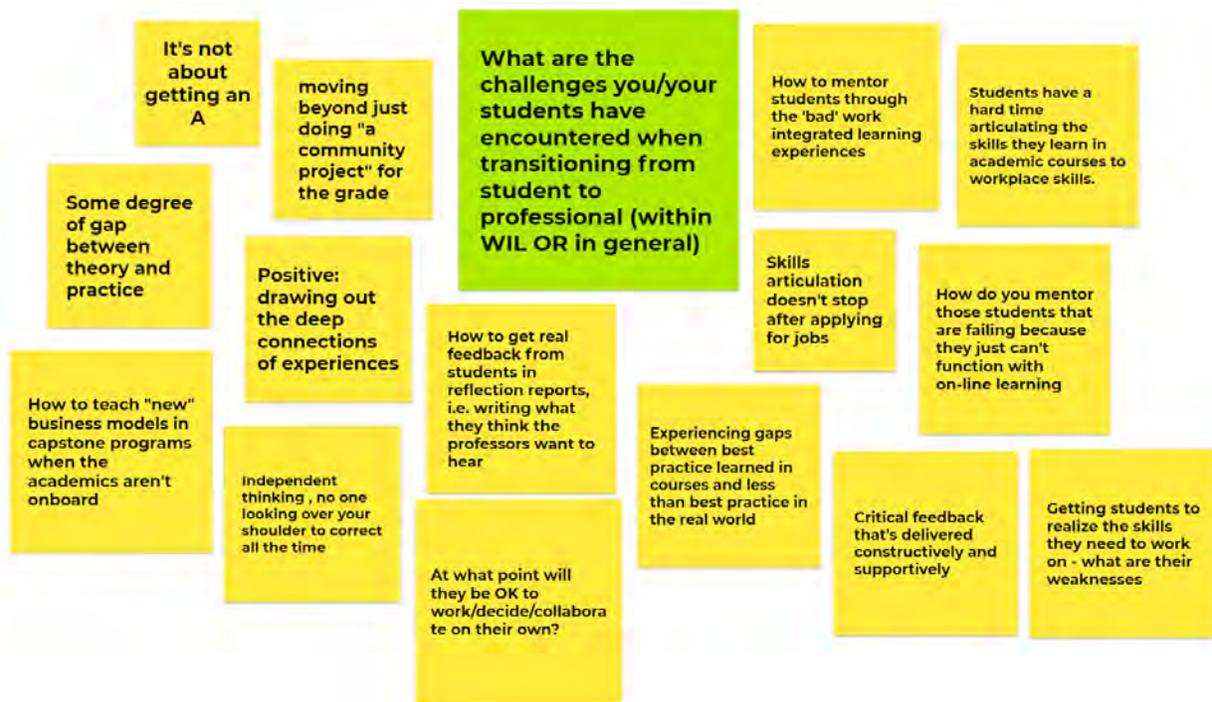
Once student teams have formed and an initial orientation to problems has occurred, teams create a proposal to analyze the problem and suggest a course of action to undertake for the duration of the semester. Feedback and iterative adjustments are made by the team until the proposal has been accepted, and then the teams work to create documents and outputs that analyze the business problem and make recommendations or validation tests of actions in the areas of marketing and sales, operations and human resources, and financials. This culminates into a deep and integrated understanding of the business, problems, and recommendation. The final course output is the creation of a short video highlighting their findings and recommendations. Although this design positions student teams as consultants in real problems and experience learning through WIL opportunities, the documents and outputs are still perceived as being more of an institution course-based practice. An iteration of this re-design is currently underway to examine a more open practice for students to identify outputs that are relevant to their identified problems and are real to practice. Capstone instructors could mentor students to make the appropriate selection of applicable outputs that more appropriately serve as relevant actions to the industry-based problem and allow for concurrent strategic alignment to course outcomes.



experiences. It was a shared theme across a multitude of disciplines and institutions represented by the session participants.

Figure 3

*Collaborative Identification of Challenges Experienced in Student to Professional Transitions*



*Note.* The question posed to the conference participants invited sharing a contribution about challenges participants encountered when transitioning from student to professional. The participants' responses were contributed through a Jamboard at the Conference on Postsecondary Teaching and Learning Presentation, May 5, 2021.

Mentorship, especially in WIL courses, is a critical to support successful workplace readiness. This prepares graduates for the anticipated responsibilities and experiences they will encounter in their careers and workplaces. Future researchers should consider exploring the design and framing effects of creating stronger alignment between programs for culminating WIL experiences for graduating students and the mentorship structures and training for instructors.

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