

The Best of Both Worlds: Infusing Liberal Learning into a Business Curriculum

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

Business and the arts and sciences are complementary, rather than competitive, elements of a complete education

AT BENTLEY COLLEGE, a four-year private institution located in Waltham, Massachusetts, over 90 percent of students major in business disciplines. For decades, Bentley's strong arts and sciences departments have battled for a place within an overwhelmingly career-focused curriculum, and great strides have been made to change the traditional relationship between business and the arts and sciences. Recently, for example, students gained the opportunity to pursue a double major comprising a business discipline and an interdisciplinary liberal studies program. And over two recent summers, in an effort designed to facilitate the integration of liberal learning principles across the curriculum, the college has offered weeklong workshops to faculty in both business and the arts and sciences.

The value of liberal learning

Bentley's desire to integrate liberal learning principles across the curriculum is based on the belief that business and the arts and sciences are *complementary*, rather than competitive, elements of a complete education. A genuinely rich education should be the basis for both professional success and a more meaningful life. The ability to deal with ambiguity,

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for example, or to integrate seemingly unrelated ideas and perspectives helps young women and men succeed in their chosen fields. This notion is echoed by the former chief executive officer of General Motors, Roger Smith (1987), who believes that "the Liberal Arts may ultimately prove to be the most relevant learning model. People trained in the Liberal Arts learn to tolerate ambiguity and to bring order out of apparent confusion. They have the kind of sideways thinking and cross-classifying habit of mind that comes from learning, among other things, the many different ways of looking at literary works, social systems, chemical processes, or languages."

Fostering such "sideways thinking" is one aim of the liberal arts. Getting business students to recognize that they, too, can benefit from such a background is essential to their success in industry. Employers are asking for a broader set of skills and attitudes that include more effective communication and quantitative skills as well as familiarity with and grounding in issues related to innovation, diversity, and global cultures (Schneider 2005). According to Roberts T. Jones (2005, 35), "virtually all occupational endeavors require a working appreciation of the historical, cultural, ethical, and global environments that surround the application of skilled work."

Given the economic effects of globalization, institutions of higher education need to reexamine their approaches to teaching and learning in order to ensure that they are preparing their students for the ever-changing nature of "the world of work" (Schneider 2005, 3). As Thomas L. Friedman (2006, 302) observes,



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“the first, and most important, ability you can develop in a flat world is the ability to ‘learn how to learn’—to constantly absorb, and teach yourself, new ways of doing old things or new ways of doing new things.” Such an approach is the basis of a liberal education.

Liberal learning workshops

In 2004, Bentley College received a grant from the Davis Foundation to integrate liberal learning with professional training. Recognizing the overlap between the two traditional approaches and enhancing some of those approaches was one goal of the workshops supported by the Davis Foundation. “Our goal,” the grant application explained, “is to reshape the curriculum in such a way that our students will encounter core liberal arts skill sets and perspectives in all their courses, and will be able to make meaningful and productive links between and among seemingly vastly different learning contexts. The priorities of liberal education will then be ‘marbled’ throughout the curriculum.” In addition, we set out to “marble” these perspectives and skill sets into the curriculum so thoroughly that students will repeatedly encounter and practice these elements in a multitude of courses and contexts well beyond the general education core. Ideally, students will be exposed to these ideas, concepts, and complexities over four years in their general education, arts and sciences, and business programs of study.

Following a collegewide search, the dean of arts and sciences appointed the chair of the finance department as the program director for the Davis grant. In conjunction with the dean, the director, in turn, appointed three liberal arts faculty members to serve as both organizers and facilitators of the workshops. These faculty members were chosen from the history, natural and applied sciences, and English departments. During the fall and spring semesters of the first year, they met to assess current liberal learning initiatives on campus, to discuss the needs of the faculty, and to design a faculty workshop. They determined that the workshop should encourage faculty to examine the limitations of discipline-based thinking and practices, to consider interdisciplinary approaches to current assignments, and to infuse their courses with materials that highlight the five strategic areas of the grant: ethics and social responsibility; technology and

effective communication; creative thinking and critical analysis; service to the community; and diversity and global citizenship.

Throughout the first year, the Davis group worked to develop a workshop that would provide the support, forum, and resources to help faculty consider their syllabi, cases, and course projects in light of the strategic priorities and perspectives; explore productive ways of integrating some dimension of these priorities into what they already do in the classroom; and present their new ideas to and get feedback from workshop colleagues. Faculty were then invited to apply for a place in one of two weeklong workshops to be held during the summer. As part of the application process, each described an aspect of a course



he or she was interested in revising (e.g., modifying an existing assignment, revising a course syllabus, rethinking an approach to classroom lectures or discussions, or designing a new module). Once accepted, faculty were encouraged to come to the workshop having thought through the ways in which they might already be incorporating these liberal arts perspectives into their courses or to consider ways in which they might begin to infuse their courses with these perspectives or skill sets.

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Bentley already provides faculty with a variety of resources for creating dynamic classrooms, such as technologically advanced classrooms and seminars on topics like ethics and diversity. The workshops supported by the Davis Foundation

grant supplemented those programs by providing participating faculty with the opportunity to infuse their courses with liberal learning principles.

Modeling one approach

In designing and leading the workshops, the facilitators were committed to modeling liberal learning principles in the modules offered.



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For example, facilitators designed sessions that allowed workshop participants to give input on the direction of a session. Recognizing that faculty might attend the sessions with some reservations about being able to implement all of the demonstrated liberal learning strategies in their courses, the first day's module, entitled "Obstacles and Impediments," gave faculty an opportunity to voice their concerns. These included worries about teaching in areas outside of their expertise and sacrificing course content in order to include themes like diversity or ethics. Participants also discussed their anxieties about whether they could rely upon institutional support for innovative approaches as well as about the potential downside to innovation.

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from different disciplines and divisions teach. During the first two days of the weeklong session, faculty participants deconstructed what currently goes on in classrooms across the college. In order to free them of any disciplinary constraints, modules asked faculty to create assignments, syllabi, and business cases for courses other than their own. In one module, for example, faculty were asked to create a syllabus for a course on Southeast Asia. They were given no other particulars or parameters. The resulting syllabi emerged from collaborations among faculty from a range of departments, including economics, philosophy, finance, and English. Faculty collaborated across disciplines and, by doing so, came up with creative solutions to the many "obstacles" they had listed on that first day. In one case, faculty from history, English, and finance created a transdisciplinary



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course that included a two-week embedded travel component.

The experience of designing “someone else’s syllabus,” along with kindred exercises, largely succeeded in liberating faculty participants from their devotion to narrow, rigid disciplinary paradigms. The transdisciplinary collaborations proved beneficial as faculty moved into a “reconstruction” phase toward the end of the week and were asked to concentrate their efforts on changes they wanted to make to their own course materials. This was performed in concentrated personal time called “mini-sabbaticals,” which were used to finalize independent work. Following these focused efforts, faculty were asked to pair up with another participant from a different discipline in order to present their ideas. Then, each person presented his or her partner’s plans to the larger group.

These paired presentations turned out to be among the most powerful experiences of the workshop. In each case, participants made a special effort to understand and accurately articulate what their partners had developed. For example, in one presentation, a faculty member from the finance department reviewed the proposed changes of a faculty member from the English department. Together, they collaborated on ways the literature professor could “marbleize” the themes throughout her Shakespearean film course. In return, the literature professor helped the finance professor think through the integration of ethical issues into his corporate finance course. In another pairing, a faculty member from the taxation department helped a historian create Great Thinkers of the Twentieth Century, an ambitious course that incorporates material usually fenced off within philosophy and literature and that was later submitted to the college’s curriculum committee for consideration as a future undergraduate offering.

Unexpected benefits

While facilitators planned numerous activities and exercises for the workshop participants, some of the benefits of the workshops derived from experiences outside the classroom setting. Faculty who had often seen each other only at full faculty meetings or during committee work spent one week together from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. each day. The lunch hour, often a break from workshop modules, gave participants a

chance to become acquainted and to learn about each other’s areas of specialization. The discussions generated during these open periods resulted in arts and sciences faculty and business faculty disabusing each other of misunderstandings about their pedagogies, curricula, and disciplines. Many faculty expressed delight at being officially encouraged, for the first time in their careers, to think in unorthodox and even subversive ways about the content of their courses and their classroom methods.

The Davis Workshops have been an extraordinary success for Bentley College and have influenced pedagogy and thinking across departments and disciplines. Over the course of two summers of workshops, seventy-four of approximately 250 full-time faculty members took part, including thirty-five tenured faculty and twenty-four tenure-track faculty. In all, sixty syllabi in undergraduate and graduate courses were in some way reshaped by the workshops. But the Davis Workshops were also at the core of a broader redefinition and realignment of the role of the arts and sciences in the culture of Bentley. They served as the intellectual inspiration for innovative arts and sciences initiatives at the core of the college’s mission. In retrospect this makes perfect sense, since the workshops encouraged critical reflection about the limitations imposed by our disciplines and promoted creative connections across disciplines around shared values and perspectives. But the degree to which interdisciplinary collaboration has grown is quite astounding. □

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