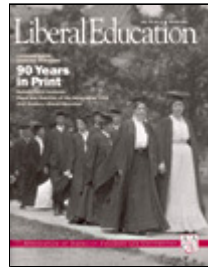


**RESOURCES ON:**

LIBERAL EDUCATION  
 GENERAL EDUCATION  
 CURRICULUM  
 FACULTY  
 INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE  
 ASSESSMENT  
 DIVERSITY  
 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
 SCIENCE & HEALTH  
 WOMEN  
 GLOBAL LEARNING

**Liberal Education, Winter 2004****Blending Liberal Art & Business Education**

By E. Byron Chew &amp; Cecilia McInnis-Bowers

**LINKS**

About Lit  
 Educatio  
 Current I  
 Previous  
 Ordering  
 Permissi  
 Offprints  
 Future Tr  
 Writer's C  
 Author Ir  
 Subject I

Business educators and colleagues in the liberal arts have not found the ideal bridge, from the student's perspective, that provides a meaningful connection between the two domains. Over the years, challenges to effectively bridge the divide between liberal arts and business have come from leaders in education, the professional business community, and from business education accrediting organizations. Words like bridging and embedding have been used to conceptually suggest the constructs of association. Most recently, the need to go beyond bridging or embedding to a more seamless approach to blending the domains has been asserted. Professional studies, such as business, should be approached as liberal education: "[T]here should be an end to the traditional, artificial distinctions between liberal and practical education" (AAC&U 2003).

Colleagues from business and liberal arts must explore and challenge the intent and consequences of the separation, indeed dissociation, between their respective domains, particularly from the student's perspective. This dissociation is grounded in the historical evolution of higher education itself, with liberal education's domain broadening knowledge and thinking in contrast to professional studies, i.e. business, narrowing to focus on development of applied skills. However, dissociation between the domains exacerbates the problems of business students' neither perceiving the value in general education courses nor demonstrating cohesive and connected learning outcomes. Such curricular separation may thwart the ability of a student in business to become a liberally educated leader and manager.

Using one small, traditional liberal arts college's experience as an example, ways of blending these domains, rather than bridging the phantom yet palpable chasm between, are discussed here.

The benefits of constructing programs of study that effectively prepare the liberally educated business professional have been well recognized and discussed for over a century. In 1890, Charles William Elliot, president of Harvard, commented that the object of a good education for business people would require development of "accuracy in observation, quickness and certainty in seizing upon the main points of a new subject, and discrimination in separating the trivial from the important in great masses of facts," and that "liberal education develops a sense of right, duty and honor." Further, he emphasized the need for communication and values, two things believed to directly emanate from a liberal education (Eliot 1923).

The call for grounding the budding business professional in the liberal arts was

again echoed during the mid-1900s when both the Carnegie Foundation (Pierson, et al. 1959) and Ford Foundation (Gordon and Howell 1959) commissioned studies to review the content of undergraduate business education. Indicating that the business professional needs education in the basic disciplines rather than technical skills, these reports emphasized the importance of a business education grounded in the traditional basic disciplines of a liberal education.

Similar expectations from the professional business community continue to be expressed. Business education accrediting organizations have sought to ensure that students are provided the breadth of a liberal arts education. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International), the largest and oldest accrediting organization for business education, has standards for the coverage of liberal arts learning outcomes (2003).

Bobko and Tejada (2000) point out, " Many business schools have adopted policies that begin to embrace a liberal arts, fundamental-knowledge based approach." One of the policies cited as evidence that business schools were embracing the value of studies within the liberal arts, was the "delayed entry into undergraduate [business] programs until the third year." This matriculation recommendation supported by the Ford Foundation Study in 1959 (Gordon and Howell) was adopted as a standard of educational quality for undergraduate business education; it continues to be supported by business accrediting organizations. The presumption was that students should spend two full academic years focusing on liberal arts education to lay a foundation prior to study within the business major, which, it was assumed, would occur in the final two years.

### **Bridging is indicative of the problem**

"Embedding strong liberal arts content in business education appears to best position students for the flexible, increasingly global, and diverse workplace of the future . . . to find informed solutions that are both technically superior as well as critically and ethically evaluated" (Bobko and Tejada 2000). The apparently timeless call to produce liberally educated business graduates seems to suggest that the methods to address this call, indeed the documented need, have not been completely effective. One point to consider is that, for the most part, business curricula have not "embedded" liberal arts into the student's program of study, but rather have isolated it, by separating it from the business education process. Interestingly, this may be, albeit unintentionally, exemplified by traditional business schools' expecting students to complete the majority of their general education prior to the third academic year; this was to ensure that students have demonstrably attained sufficient learning from their general education, for example, as represented by a minimum grade point average prior to admission into a school of business. Thus, the need exists for a bridge or other construct to span the separation created by the aforementioned curricular structure.

Building a bridge to connect the two domains assumes a separation that must be crossed by students. The result is a common attitude among professional students that liberal arts, or general education, classes are to be quickly checked off a list of graduation requirements. Implied is that graduation requirements of English, foreign language, history, psychology, mathematics, et al., are "filler" until students can begin the relevant courses in the business major; in other words, students hurry to get across the bridge to the other side of the river, the "useful side." In actuality, bridging has served to further validate the separation between the liberal arts and business, particularly in the mind of the student. This "river of separation" between the domains must, from the student's perspective, reinforce the perception that liberal arts courses lack relevance to the "real world" or to future career pursuits.

### **Beyond bridges**

This disconnected curricular structure challenges educators with the task of enabling students to grasp the interconnections in their business education

between concepts and skills from a rich array of liberal arts. Students do not perceive a cohesive learning experience, and the curricular disconnect between the domains could be partly responsible. Educators have expressed concerns about the apparent inability of students to make connections, even within one program of study; certainly these concerns multiply as students are challenged to make connections between unrelated--disconnected--programs of study:

The fragmentation of the curriculum into a collection of independently "owned" courses is itself an impediment to student accomplishment, because the different courses students take . . . are not expected to engage or build on one another. Few maps exist to help students plan or integrate their learning as they move in and out of separately organized courses, programs, and campuses. In the absence of shared learning goals and clear expectations, a college degree more frequently certifies completion of disconnected fragments than of a coherent plan for student accomplishment (AAC&U 2003).

Enabling students to make connections is a challenge not only in general education, but in business programs as well. In fact, the need to ensure that business students make meaningful connections across the functional disciplines in business (marketing, management, finance, etc.) is so recognized that the professional accreditation organizations encourage integrating or summative experiences for students, thus enabling them, in structured settings, to bring together the learning outcomes within the functional areas of business (Gordon and Howell 1959, AACSB 2003).

Integrating functional knowledge from within a business curriculum is important, but it does not explicitly address integrating the learning outcomes from the liberal arts into the major. The summative experience that is needed is one that integrates learning outcomes from the two domains (Chew, McInnis-Bowers, et al. 1996). Furthermore,

These culminating performances, which will vary with different fields of study, ought to provide evidence that students can integrate the many parts of their education. They can show how well students actually possess the intellectual, practical, and evaluative judgment and the sense of responsibility a college degree should represent (AAC&U 2003).

### **Blending rather than bridging**

It is time to design curricular offerings that move beyond this traditional split between the domains of liberal arts and business education. Blending the liberal arts with business curricula, rather than bridging, is a strategy for educators to explore that may produce business graduates who are truly liberally educated.

"Foundations of Business Thought," a first-year course in the general education foundations curriculum and a required introductory course in the business major at Birmingham-Southern College, provides a model of blending business education with traditional liberal arts content to foster the student learning outcomes that educators in both domains and interested members of the business community are seeking.

At the college, a favorable climate for a curricular change that intentionally blends liberal arts and business learning outcomes had developed. The business faculty were being challenged to create a general education course that would be included in the college's first-year experience. The timing of this new challenge was fortuitous: The business faculty had become increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which the introductory business course, "Survey of Business," with its rapid and cursory review of the functional business areas, was educating business majors about the relevance of business enterprises in society, ethical standards for

business, and corporate social responsibility. Concurrently, in a career that culminated in becoming chairman and CEO of a Fortune 500 company, a member of the college's Board of Trustees who served on its Academic Affairs Committee had been inspired by the ideas of business philosopher Michael Novak. This trustee challenged the business faculty to find a way to integrate Novak's ideas into the business curriculum. The combination and timing of these factors led to the decision to create a new offering that would meet both business and liberal education learning objectives. As Rabuzzi (2001) notes, "Business and the humanities need to create strategic alliances," and college "trustees can be valuable sources of perspective for building courses with relevance." Creating an interdisciplinary team of faculty from liberal arts and business, coupled with inspiration from a trustee, led to the development of a blended course.

An interdisciplinary team of faculty from the humanities, social sciences, and business identified the learning outcomes and a variety of literature that could be suitable for structuring business-related discussions.

Some faculty favored using full texts of appropriate readings, while others favored excerpts. Reading the entirety of a work "has the benefit of presenting a full treatment of the author's work and placing into context the specific materials being emphasized. It has the drawback that time does not permit the coverage of a wider range of materials" (Boardman 1998).

The search for a referent model and suitable materials revealed the syllabus for a course offered at the University of Utah that was similar to the course that the interdisciplinary development team was designing. The professor who designed the course assembled a customized book of excerpted readings that included most of those suggested by the interdisciplinary faculty development team (Boardman and Sandomir 2002).

### **The blended course**

"Foundations of Business Thought" is an introductory course in the business major. With its blending of the domains of business and liberal arts, it functions as a cornerstone experience to anchor students in the fundamental outcomes expected from study within the liberal arts to be demonstrated through their application to the study of business.

These fundamental learning outcomes include: oral and written communication skills, critical thinking and analysis, breadth of perspective shaped from multiple points of view, understanding of one's own sense of values, ethical frames and perspectives, and the ability to understand time, place, and culture from a global perspective. The syllabus states:

Using a variety of classic and contemporary literature, "Foundations of Business Thought" provides students the opportunity to explore their own and others' perceptions and opinions about business and the role individuals play in business organizations, whether corporate or entrepreneurial. The course reviews the evolution of thought on the organizational structure of business enterprises to gain a contextual framework for understanding how individuals contribute to accomplishing objectives of business organizations. In particular, the course considers objectives of business that include more than profitability, in other words, more than the "bottom line."

In addition to gaining a broad and enriched perspective of the purposes and objectives of business over time, the process of responding in writing and orally to thought-provoking discussion questions enables and ensures that the student dedicates the time it takes to hone both cognitive skills and communication skills; mandatory sessions with the division of humanities' writing tutorial service are required, to instill the value of continuous improvement of self expression.

Learning to "interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources" and

"transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action" (AAC&U 2003) is a goal of the course. Research papers profile a company and its competitors, present the current situation and operational context of the business, plus reflect the company's stance on corporate social responsibility, ethical conduct, core values, and vision and mission statements. With continuing emphasis on written communication, a significant portion of the student's grade is determined by the quality of written expression, grammar and syntax, appropriate referencing, and formatting. This exercise, supported by the college's reference librarians, gives the students experience in transforming data into knowledge, and emphasizes the importance of written expression for business. The final section of "Foundations of Business Thought," entitled *The Individual in Business*, moves students into an exploration of themselves as individuals, their personalities, aspirations, and contemplation about their vocational "callings," as reflected in the course syllabus:

In addition to forming and articulating opinions about business, you will have the opportunity to explore and develop a deeper understanding of how your unique personality has expressed preferences for certain characteristics in work environments, leadership styles, communication styles, etc.

Students critically assess their personality characteristics to understand factors that drive their decision-making processes. Broadening the perspective of the definition of intelligence, leadership, and emotional intelligence (Goleman 2000) provides complementary insights that coordinate with the information gleaned from the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory (Myers-Briggs 1993, Hirsh and Kummerow 1999). Thus, the blending of content and processes from psychology, the concepts of emotional intelligence, and an understanding of personal life planning, enriches students' personal development, enhances their understanding of the interplay of individuals in business organizations, and begins the identification of their "callings" in life. Using the philosophical perspective of *Business as a Calling* (Novak 1996), students are able to reflect on their self-discovery and to begin envisioning their future callings. The learning outcomes include students' self-discovery in context with others. It parallels the "deep understanding of one's self and respect for the complex identities of others" (AAC&U 2003).

Continuing with self-exploration, students craft personal vision and mission statements and write on the topic of creation and disposition of personal wealth, much inspired by Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth*. Throughout the course, students analyze readings from the classics by philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius, to more recent works, including Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Students grapple with the challenge of analyzing and synthesizing perspectives from voices throughout time that have influenced cultural interpretations of the roles and purposes of business and of articulating their own examined, personal values.

### **Future challenges**

Effectively producing a genuinely liberally educated business professional is hampered by both the curricular structures that separate liberal arts from business education as well as from fragmented, disconnected, independent courses throughout the general education and business curricula. These issues very likely reinforce the business student's perception that the course work in liberal arts lacks relevance to the business major, or indeed, to future career pursuits.

The challenge, for both liberal arts and business colleagues, is to design learning experiences that blend one with the other. "Culminating performances," or capstone experiences, that intentionally evaluate broad learning outcomes compared with general education and disciplinary goals, such as business administration, is one such effort (Chew, McInnis-Bowers, et al. 1996). Creating specific courses within both the general education program and the business major, such as "Foundations of Business Thought," is another example of

blending. Providing such courses in the early phase of a student's education can reinforce the value and benefits--indeed, necessity--of liberal arts education for business majors.

Rather than isolating the content and objectives into separate learning experiences, blending liberal arts and business learning outcomes in course experiences may hold promise for meeting the challenge to end "the traditional, artificial distinction between liberal and practical education" (AAC&U 2003). In turn, the result could be an effective, liberally educated business professional, who, as Elliot envisioned, would have "accuracy in observation, quickness and certainty in seizing upon the main points of a new subject, and discrimination in separating the trivial from the important in great masses of facts," as well as "a sense of right, duty, and honor" (Eliot 1923).

---

**E. Byron Chew** is Monaghan professor of management at Birmingham-Southern College and **Cecilia McInnis-Bowers** is visiting professor of international business at Rollins College.

---

### Works Cited

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2003. *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International). 2003. *Eligibility procedures and standards for business accreditation*. St. Louis, MO: AACSB International.

Boardman, Calvin M. 1998. Cicero's merchant. *Financial Practice and Education*, 8:2

Boardman, Calvin and Allan Sandomir. 2002. *Foundations of business thought*, Fifth Edition. Old Tappan, NJ: Pearson Custom Publishing.

Bobko, Philip and Manuel J. Tejada. 2000. Liberal arts and management education: Reemphasizing the link for the 21st century. *Journal of Business Education*, Fall.

Chew, E. Byron, Cecilia McInnis-Bowers, Aubrey Drewry, and Paul Cleveland. 1996. The business administration capstone. *Liberal Education*, 82:1.

Eliot, Charles William. Speech to the New York City Chamber of Commerce 1890. In Thomas B. Reed, ed. 1923. *Modern eloquence*, 4: 94-98. New York: Stationers' Hall, London.

Foundations of Business Thought *Syllabus*. 2001.

Goldman, Daniel. 2000. Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*. March-April.

Gordon, Robert Aaron and James Edwin Howell. 1959 *Higher education for*

*business*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsh, Sandra and Jean Kummerow. 1999. *Introduction to type in organizations: Individual interpretive guide*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.

Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory. 1993. Palo Alto, CA. Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.

Novak, Michael. 1996. *Business as a calling*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Pierson, Frank, C. 1959. *The education of American businessmen*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Rabuzzi, Daniel A. 2001. Business needs the humanities. *Liberal Education*, 87: 2.

---

*To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org) with authors' names on the subject line.*