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ABSTRACT

This report describes the efforts of Babson College (Massachusetts) to change its traditional undergraduate business curriculum by designing a coherent program of greater rigor and flexibility that stresses interdisciplinary collaboration, supports individual learning needs, and links theory with field-based learning. In less than 3 years, Babson conceived, ratified, and implemented a radically different undergraduate program; the speed of implementation was in part a result of Babson's prior move to use separate, decentralized decision-making bodies for the undergraduate program, the graduate program, and for faculty appointment and tenure decisions. The comprehensive, competency-based program stresses learning-by-doing, gives students greater control over and responsibility for their educations, and contains three development levels: the first-year Foundation Program, which includes self-reflective work, integrated humanities and quantitative courses, and hands-on experience developing and running a business; the third through fifth semester Intermediate Program, which includes integrated liberal arts courses and a core management program; and in the remaining three semesters, the Advanced Program, in which students follow a curriculum and co-curricular program developed with the assistance of mentors during the intermediate program. Institutional statistics and a list of milestones on Babson's path to reform are included. (MAB)

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Exemplars Exemplars

ED 422 776

Babson College

The Problem: *A traditional, disciplinary, lock-step undergraduate curriculum was under-preparing graduates for the changing business environment of a global economy.*

The Solution: *Design a coherent program that includes greater rigor and flexibility, stresses interdisciplinary collaboration, better supports individual learning needs, and more explicitly links theory with field-based learning.*

For years, Babson College took pride in the knowledge that—by all traditional measures—it was the best business college of its kind; indeed, *U.S. News and World Report* agreed with this assessment, ranking Babson as the nation's number-one specialty school for eight years running. But, in pressing beyond this measure to ask in all candor, "How are we doing?" the College received an answer that not only changed its self-perception but also completely redirected the focus of its undergraduate education.

Not an institution willing to rest on its laurels, Babson changed before it had to. The College surveyed its constituents and convened a three-day retreat in August of 1993 with its stakeholders—alumni, employees, and students—to discuss the relevance of the existing undergraduate curriculum. Babson faculty had just integrated the core of the MBA curriculum, breaking down the disciplinary boundaries that had traditionally defined student coursework, and the College's leadership suspected that the undergraduate program might benefit from a similar redesign. Their suspicions were highlighted in the survey results and confirmed at the retreat: former and current students criticized the business school's menu

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of courses, citing a rigid structure, a disconnection with the real world of work, and a tendency to teach skills in isolation. Faculty expressed disappointment with students' lack of engagement in their studies. What came as more of a surprise, however, were employers' lukewarm reviews of the performance of Babson graduates.

Emerging from the retreat, Babson quickly realized that its undergraduate curriculum needed to become more rigorous, flexible, and able to instill in students a greater responsibility for their own intellectual and interpersonal growth. The solution was to reinvent the College's approach to undergraduate business education, using the disciplinary integration of the MBA program as a model. Rather than simply restructure course requirements, the faculty moved to create a new learning *environment* at Babson—one that is rich in practical and field experiences, integrates the disciplines, and supports individual learning needs. "We wanted to shift to an interdisciplinary focus," says Stephen Schiffman, dean of the undergraduate program, "because in today's business world, you're not an accountant on Monday, an organizational behaviorist on Tuesday, and a manager on Wednesday. You are all things at all times."

Moving quite literally at the speed of business, in just under three years Babson conceived, ratified, and implemented a radically different undergraduate program. "Four things made this swift but purposeful change possible: the integration of the disciplines in the MBA program; the fact that our relatively small faculty teaches both graduate and undergraduate students; the strategic funds put in place in 1989 to promote curriculum reform; and a change in governance in the early 1990s."

Prior to the advent of reform, Babson had already recast and streamlined its governance process by forming three elected Decision-Making Bodies (DMBs)—one for the undergraduate program, one for the graduate program, and one for faculty appointment and tenure decisions. Small and nimble, each DMB is composed of five elected faculty members. "If elected, faculty know they are going to wear a 'college hat,' not a departmental one," says Schiffman, who sees the structure of the DMBs as essential to their effectiveness. The faculty, writ large, has entrusted decision-making powers to these small groups, empowering them to initiate, focus, nurture, guide, and *approve* programmatic changes. Collegiality has not been sacrificed for the sake of efficiency; individual faculty members who dispute the action of a DMB can write a white paper to alert the college community and call for a full faculty vote. In the seven years since the

they are structuring the shape of your education, and you know how they're doing it."

Other components of the Foundation Program include integrated humanities and quantitative courses as well as the Foundation Management Experience (FME), a hands-on, year-long required course in which students develop and run an actual business. The FME is funded by loans from the College, but students donate their proceeds and time to a charity. Adam, who is serving as the CEO of his class's Kash 4 Kids Discount Card business, clearly sees the relationship between the FME, the competencies, and the applied learning stressed in Babson's new curriculum: "I now understand how the success of a manager is determined by the quality of your communication skills—that you need to know how to motivate people. I've also learned about the other side: the problems that occur when someone drops the ball and how creative you must be to deal with a situation that has real constraints. What you learn through this hands-on experience is intangible—it's not a grade, but a series of lessons you know you can build on in the future."

During the second semester of the Foundation level, students reflect on their performance through the Babson External Assessment Program (BEAP), where they receive feedback on the development of competencies from volunteer members of the local business community, alumni, and MBA students. The assessors are trained by faculty to gauge students' oral communication, leadership, listening, teamwork, and decision-making skills through structured and videotaped conversations. "It's a matter of pride for us that, of the 340 students involved in the first BEAP program, all but eight showed up for their assessments at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning," says Schiffman.

The Intermediate Program—undertaken during students' third through fifth semesters—includes integrated liberal arts courses and the Intermediate Management Core (IMC), which teaches core management courses in a profoundly different way than traditional business school curricula. Babson designed the IMC to address the *process* of management, developing students' competencies to become broad-based entrepreneurial problem-solvers. The three-semester sequence of courses focuses on critical thinking—teaching students how to analyze and approach a complex and ambiguous problem, identify salient information to address the problem, apply appropriate analytical tools, settle on a course of action, and create a plan to implement the solution.

there are many areas which still require refinement. In addition, it is still too early to offer hard evidence of improvement. But if success has an anecdotal measure, it is well-represented by this story, told by Allan Cohen, vice president of academic affairs, about more recent levels of student engagement: "Under the old curriculum, there were constant complaints about the state of the Quad on every Friday afternoon in the spring; students were lounging in the sun, radios blaring, doing anything but coursework and attending classes. Now, you can walk across the Quad on a sunny day, and there isn't a peep. It looks as though the changes we made are having the desired effect: students are taking more direct responsibility for their own learning."

Institutional Statistics:

Private business college in eastern Massachusetts

1,627 undergraduate and **1,644** full- and part-time MBA students

151 full-time faculty; **53** part-time faculty

Milestones on the Path to Reform:

- Curriculum renewal began in the late 1980s, when faculty members started to rethink the MBA program, shifting from a disciplinary-based structure to an interdisciplinary focus. At the same time, some faculty who taught undergraduates began discussing the need to raise standards and the level of rigor expected of freshmen.
- A new College president arrived in 1989, initiated a strategic planning process in each of the degree programs, and set up a multi-year strategic funds budget to promote curricular reform initiatives.
- In 1990, the governance structure of the College was altered. Small, elected faculty Decision Making Bodies (DMBs) were formed to allow for faster, more flexible curriculum change.
- In the early 1990s, academic vice president Allan Cohen led the development of a new faculty workload planning tool, called "Guideprof."
- In August of 1993, Babson held a three-day retreat on the state of the undergraduate curriculum. There was agreement that the curriculum needed to be strengthened, especially in the areas of disciplinary inte-

- The first semester of the new Intermediate Management Core (IMC) was launched for all second-year students in the fall of 1997. The IMC, a three-semester integrated sequence, was designed to replace the separate functional business courses that comprised the old management core.

Exemplars Exemplars

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