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EACH YEAR THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE) asks freshmen and seniors at participating institutions to evaluate their classroom participation, interaction with faculty, time spent on various enriching activities, and other aspects of student life. The goals is to provide institutions with feedback on how engaged their students are in activities that enhance learning. For the past half a decade, Elon University has scored among the nation's top colleges and universities. In this essay, Dean John J. Burbridge, Jr., describes how Elon's Martha and Spencer Love School of Business incorporates the concept of student engagement to realize superior outcomes.

Business Schools and the Concept of Student Engagement

by John J. Burbridge, Jr., Dean, Martha and Spencer Love School of Business, Elon University



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which occurred in April 2004. He has also been involved with increasing his school's experiential offerings. Before coming to Elon in 1996, Dr. Burbridge worked extensively in both industry and higher education. In the early 1980s, he was responsible for the logistics function of AIRCO Welding Products, a major supplier of welding products and gases. Dr. Burbridge also served as associate dean of the Sellinger School at Loyola College in Maryland, where he was responsible for executive and graduate programs in business. He received a B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. in industrial engineering from Lehigh University and has also taught at the College of Engineering at Rutgers University.

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Learning by doing" is a quote with which we are all familiar. Today, such an approach is considered appropriate to developing certain skills, but not necessarily to knowledge acquisition in higher education including business schools. Interestingly, at the time of the founding of the United States, the apprenticeship system was considered the preferred approach to educating young men for careers in commerce. As a result of many developments during the past 275 years, the current preferred way of educating future business leaders, especially at the undergraduate level, is to have faculty lecture in large, cavernous halls. In such an environment, students are expected to acquire the necessary knowledge either from the textbooks or lectures, and the only grade in the course may be the final examination. When confronted with this situation, some students will decide not to go to class but get notes from other students or find them on the class Web site. Unfortunately, this approach emphasizes the transfer of knowledge from lecturer to students rather than any real experiential learning on the students' part. A major question that arises is whether students can apply such knowledge.

In today's very competitive environment for entry-level positions, the acquisition of knowledge is not enough to excite a company recruiter. While faculty and students seem to place considerable value on discipline-specific knowledge taught in a lecture format, communications and interpersonal skills seem to reign supreme in the viewpoints of many recruiters. An internship within an organizational setting is often considered a must by these recruiters. The ability to address ill-structured problems through the intelligent application of knowledge is also seen as a necessary skill by many practitioners.

Why do recruiters seem to place greater emphasis on the ability of a student to be successful in an organizational setting rather than the knowledge the student has acquired? I would argue this is because there is very little difference in the knowledge acquired by graduating seniors with grade point averages of "B" or better. In addition, there is much more emphasis on culture and values in today's work environments. Hiring students who do not fit within an organization can be an enormous liability.

If there is much more emphasis on interpersonal skills, the question arises as to whether higher education is responding to such demands. While the main focus of the academic offerings is still focused at discipline-specific knowledge acquisition, there has been a broadening of the academic experience to include what has been termed student life. Through student life, students on many campuses are being exposed to leadership training, service learning, and other personal development offerings, allowing them to further cultivate interpersonal skills. Athletes who are good students have always been coveted by recruiters, since they often develop such skills through team sports. Students involved in such activities, coupled with a challenging academic environment, result in engaged students. At Elon we have found that the higher the level of student engagement, the more likely the student will graduate.

Can the concept of student engagement become more widespread in higher education and be measured?

This challenge has resulted in the Carnegie Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust collaborating on the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE, conceived in early 1998, collects data directly from students concerning their relative levels of student engagement. The NSSE measures student engagement as a collection of five benchmarks of excellence:

1. Active and collaborative learning,
2. Student interactions with faculty members,
3. Enriching educational experiences,
4. Level of academic challenge, and
5. Supportive campus environment.

These measures of excellence are a result of research into what constitutes a positive learning environment. NSSE is somewhat novel in that it relies exclusively on the perspectives of students, not input measures or third-parties. The NSSE attempts to fo-

cus on how students learn and considers alternative experiences other than what happens in the traditional classroom. The survey, introduced in 2000 on 275 campuses, was used by 473 universities and colleges during the past year (National Survey of Student Engagement).

The survey is administered on an annual basis and is completed by both first-year students and seniors. The questions fall in three main categories. First, there are specific questions concerning the institution and curriculum, such as the length and quantity of writing assignments, the amount of critical thinking, the number of presentations, and the interaction with teachers. Second, students are asked about their college experience and behaviors through questions on how they spend their time both in and out of class, their involvement with other students on assignments, and their extra-curricula activities. Finally, students are asked to self-assess the gains they have made as a result of their college experience. Through the responses to these questions, educators can compare their institution with peers in the quest for continuous improvement.

When one looks at the questions used in the NSSE, it is obvious that the instrument provides information concerning the traditional discipline-specific education, but also the ability of students to acquire skills that recruiters feel are critical in the hiring process. Active and collaborative learning results in students who can apply the knowledge they have acquired. Collaborative learning results in students with greater teamwork skills. Enriching educational experiences such as study abroad and internships result in more mature students who are sensitive to environments other than the traditional college campus. The level of academic challenge, if coupled with difficult ill-structured problems, will allow the student to more easily confront real societal and business situations. Recruiters should pay attention to NSSE results at colleges where they plan to recruit.

The NSSE also provides institutions with the necessary data to drive continuous improvement. At Elon and the Love School of Business, the annual results associated with the NSSE categories are reviewed and plans are made to respond to any shortcomings. The NSSE results drive continuous improvement and enhance the quality of the learning experience.

For the past four years, Elon University has ranked in the top 10 percent in each of the five measures of excellence associated with NSSE. During this same period of time, Elon has seen the number of applications for undergraduate admission increase both in quantity and quality.

How has Elon achieved such high rankings in the area of student engagement?

Ten years ago, a decision was made to move from a three-credit to a four-credit course. The idea of the extra credit was not to cram more knowledge into the minds of students, but to strengthen active and collaborative learning within the normal class. The downside of this change is that a student takes fewer courses. This subtle but real consequence of the four-credit course structure requires faculty to think carefully about curriculum.

Today, professors at Elon use a variety of approaches to the teaching of a normal class. Faculty must learn how to foster class discussion, incorporate team activities and develop specific active learning approaches to address the subject matter. Such teaching is a significant challenge since it requires a faculty member to lessen the level of direct control over a class.

In addition to the four-credit concept, Elon has created the experiential learning requirement. All graduates from Elon must have completed one of the following: (1) study abroad; (2) internship; (3) a multi-year leadership program; (4) service learning, or (5) undergraduate research. In addition to their normal transcript showing coursework and grades, students also receive an experiential learning transcript showing all such activities.

The results associated with the experiential learning requirement are impressive: 63 percent of the graduating seniors in May 2004 had an international experience while at Elon, 78 percent completed an internship, and over 100 first-year students participated in the emerging leaders program while more than 80,000 hours were contributed to community activities as a result of service-learning approaches. Finally, one entire day of the university calendar is now devoted to students reporting on their undergraduate research projects. In April 2004, 98 students presented. Out of the 2004 graduates, 16 percent had completed an undergraduate research experience.

In addition to these requirements, Elon University requires all students to take an upper-level interdisciplinary seminar that features active and collaborative learning. Next semester I will be teaching a course focusing on baseball and statistics that will require all students to participate in an undergraduate research project.

How has the Martha and Spencer Love School of Business at Elon incorporated the concept of student engagement?

As expected, business school faculty and students place considerable value on functional courses such as accounting, marketing, finance, and information systems. I agree that the premium business school graduates receive in the job market is because they have a knowledge base that allows them to walk into an organization and know what debits and credits, the four Ps of marketing, and the time value of money are all about. However, I'm not sure if businesses expect business administration graduates will be well versed in the latest *Business Week* hot subjects, such as expensing options, customer relationship marketing, or XML programming.

According to the latest *Wall Street Journal* ranking of MBA programs, communications and interpersonal skills are most important to company recruiters (Alsop, September 22, 2004). If they are important at the MBA level, it is also important for undergraduates to pos-

sess these skills. Business guru Peter Drucker highlights business education's shortcomings in a recent article for *Biz Ed* magazine.

"The final lesson is the need to acquire basic literacy. Yes, you want that accountant to be an accountant, but you also want her to understand what the other organizational functions are about. That's what I call the basic literacy of the organization. Such literacy is not a matter of taking the right courses, but a matter of practical experience." (Drucker, 2001, p. 14)

More and more recruiters agree with Drucker's perspective.

Business schools must continue to provide the knowledge base, but they need to ratchet up the level of experiences. The mission statement of the Martha and Spencer Love School of Business at Elon says the following:

The Love School of Business is dedicated to provide instruction and experiences for our students so they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and character essential for responsible business leadership in the 21st century.

The Love School of Business is focused on enhancing its experiential offerings so that students can acquire the experience to which Drucker alludes. In addition to the four-credit course and the experiential learning requirement, the Love School of Business has taken certain steps to enhance its experiential offerings.

New study-abroad courses looking at the hospitality and tourism industry in New Zealand, and accounting and marketing practices in Australia and the Philippines have been introduced. The economics department has created a student-run journal, *Issues in Political Economy*, and also requires each of its majors to complete an undergraduate research project. While many students in the business school have internship experiences, a recent proposal in the business school will necessitate either an internship or a professional work experience for graduation.

The most ambitious task undertaken by the Love School of Business was the result of a \$385,000 Department of Education Funds to Improve Post-

Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant. With this grant, the Love School of Business involved 60 students in entrepreneurial ventures. Through the efforts of these students, book publishing, recording, events management, and market research companies were formed. With their involvement in these student-run firms, students received 20 credit-hours of course credit and were able to replace required courses in marketing, management, and operations. Another student-run firm, Elon Collectibles, which markets and sells Christmas ornaments featuring Elon designs, has been formed.

The results are still not conclusive concerning these efforts. Assessment efforts are now underway. However, anecdotal information tells us that students who participated received an extremely positive reception from corporate recruiters. There is no doubt that such student engagement will be well-rewarded in the marketplace. Students who are engaged acquire both the knowledge and interpersonal skills necessary for success.

To conclude, business schools must complement traditional classroom learning with approaches fostering student engagement. Participating in NSSE and using the results to enhance experiential education will result in business schools allowing students to apply the knowledge they have acquired. Such experiences will also result in students further developing their interpersonal skills and maturity levels. "Learning by doing" has a place in the modern business school.

References

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