

A New Career Strategies Course for Undergraduate Business Students

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ABSTRACT

Navigating the career landscape is becoming increasingly challenging. Career success requires our students not only to obtain their first job after graduation but also to self-manage their careers after graduation. This means that our students must develop and maintain business discipline-specific skills (accounting, finance, marketing), and career strategy skills, including how to understand and adapt to organizational culture, how to network, and how to build social capital with managers and mentors. This article presents a new course, Career Strategies, that was designed to help our students to develop the career strategy skills to successfully begin their careers after graduation. Included are the course fundamentals, including overall design, course description, learning outcomes, weekly topics, and assignments.

Keywords: course design, career strategies, experiential learning, oral presentation skills, networking

INTRODUCTION

Today's students are focused on job-related reasons for going to college, with 86% of incoming freshmen who indicate that getting a better job is a very important motivator in the decision to attend college (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2003). To help undergraduate students to obtain their first job after graduation, our business school created a professional development program that works in concert with the career development office to assist students to identify their career interests and to develop the needed skills in resume writing and interviewing. Career success, however, depends on much more than obtaining a first job. It requires business discipline-specific skills (accounting, finance, marketing), and career strategy skills, including how to understand and adapt to organizational culture, network and to build social capital with managers and mentors (Bridgstock, 2005; King, 2004). Additional career strategy skills include:

- creating career goals and identifying career paths and strategies to achieve these goals
- maximizing performance on the job by understanding and adapting to organizational culture
- defining and managing work-life balance
- developing skills to ensure inter-organizational mobility

Undergraduate students often have limited ideas about how to build a successful career and may not start to develop career strategy skills until after graduation (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). When developing such skills, they also need to take into account that the nature of careers has changed and that lifetime employment with a single organization has been increasingly replaced by boundaryless careers that involve movement across different organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). These boundaryless careers require the individual employee, rather than the organization, to plan and manage his or her career (Mirvis, 1996). To help students to launch their careers, we designed a new Career Strategies course to help our students to develop the skills to succeed in their first job as well as to help ensure their potential for future inter-organizational mobility and lifetime career success. The course works synergistically with our professional development program and career development office. These services help students to identify a career and find their first job, while the Career Strategies course helps to students meet early professional work challenges by learning how to find a mentor, by learning to build an effective relationship with their manager, and by defining and managing work-life balance in order to succeed in their first job and beyond.

THE COURSE

The course was designed under the direction of our Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, a college committee comprising representatives from each department of the business school that oversees the undergraduate curriculum. This committee helped to ensure that the course would be relevant for students who major in all of the business disciplines and that it addressed an unfilled need in the curriculum. To develop the course, we examined the career

development activities at other business schools. Most business schools provide career support, including counseling, career panels, and resume preparation through their career development offices (Wessels & Sumner, 2014). A few schools supplement career services programs with academic courses that help to develop career management skills. The George Washington University has a one-credit course, Career Management Strategy, that includes job search strategies and insights into transitioning to the workforce (The George Washington School of Business, n.d.). The Villanova School of Business has a four-year professional development program, required of all business students, that includes courses in resume development, interviewing, analysis and communication skills and professional and spiritual activities (Villanova School of Business, n.d.). The Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations has an elective three-credit course that focuses on job search strategies and career stages and paths (Rutgers School of Business, n.d.). We also reviewed the academic research on careers and interviewed HR professionals from leading companies. Based on this input, two core objectives were established for the course:

1. To help students develop strategies to successfully begin their careers after graduation.
2. To enhance the ability of students to speak with confidence and effectiveness.

Oral communication skills were made a major component of the course because 85% of employers indicated that the ability to effectively communicate orally should be a top learning outcome for college students, and only 28% of employers indicated that recent college graduates were well prepared in oral communication (Hart Research Associates, 2016).

Course Description and Learning Outcomes

Based on the course objectives, the following course description was established:

Career Strategies will help to equip students to successfully begin their professional careers. Students will examine the changing nature of work and its implications for their professional life. They will explore how to identify and adapt to organizational culture, how to build social capital, and how to cultivate work habits to maximize performance. Students also will have the opportunity to develop and enhance their oral communication skills.

Learning outcomes also were established. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Develop a set of strategies to successfully begin their careers after graduation.
2. Speak with greater confidence and effectiveness.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of how to build social capital by adapting to organizational culture, building a strong relationship with their manager, obtaining mentors and sponsors, and engaging in workplace networking.
4. Create and assess career goals, career paths, and career strategies.
5. Recognize and address issues relating to work-life balance.
6. Develop strategies to enhance inter-organizational mobility.

Teaching Method

The course relies heavily on experiential learning. Readings and brief lectures help to prepare students for course assignments designed to help them think about career issues and to enable them to develop their own career strategies. The career strategy topics concern a variety of career issues, including navigating the changing landscape of careers, choosing a career path, networking, mentoring, building a strong relationship with one's boss, understanding and adapting to organizational culture, and cultivating habits for success. In addition, the weekly in-class presentations provide the opportunity to refine and develop oral presentation skills. The weekly oral presentations increase in complexity during the semester, beginning with simple communications, such as elevator speeches, progressing to brief informal presentations on class topics and assignments, and culminating with a formal presentation of the student's career strategy.

Mentoring also is an important component of the course. Immediately following each class, the instructor will conduct both individual and group mentoring sessions on topics related to career success. Each student will be required to attend at least one individual mentoring session and two groups of the six group mentoring sessions. During the individual mentoring sessions, students are able to discuss pertinent career issues of their choice. In the course pilot during the spring 2016 semester, students used these sessions to discuss career paths, work-life balance, the merits of attending graduate school, strategies for finding a job after graduation, and the challenges that they are

facing in their current employment. The individual mentoring sessions will typically last 20–30 minutes. Students will be encouraged to use the instructor’s office hours to hold additional individual discussions. The instructor also will facilitate a number of group mentoring sessions on important career concerns, including strategies for finding and changing employment, maintaining an effective online presence, and negotiating one’s salary. During these sessions, the instructor and the students will share insights from their experience and discuss career management challenges. The group sessions typically last 30–45 minutes.

Weekly Topics

The required text for the course is *The Career Playbook: Essential Advice for Today’s Aspiring Young Professional* (Citrin, 2015) and is supplemented by readings from *The Harvard Business Review*. In addition, each week, topical readings from recent editions of leading newspapers and business periodicals are posted. Table 1 presents the topics covered during the course and the timing of the major assignments that are the building blocks for developing the student’s final career strategy presentation.

Table 1: Topics

Date	Topics	Assignments
Week 1	Course introduction Changing landscape of careers Elevator pitches	<i>Career Playbook Introduction</i> Videos on elevator pitches
Week 2	Changing landscape of careers (continued) Networking	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 4</i> Videos on networking
Week 3	Career paths and strategies Making informal presentations	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 1</i>
Week 4	Discussion of Networking Assignment 1: Work-life balance	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 2</i> Submit and present Networking Assignment 1
Week 5	Work-life balance (continued) Body language Handling Q&As	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 3</i> Read handouts on body language and Q&As
Week 6	Discussion of Networking Assignment 2: Getting started and first impressions	<i>Career Playbook Chapters 10 and 11</i> Submit and present Networking Assignment 2
Week 7	Building a relationship with one’s boss	Gabarro, J. J. and Kotter, J. P. (1993). Managing Your Boss. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 71, pp 150-157.
Week 8	Culture and diversity Presenting new ideas to one’s boss	Caver, K. A. and Livers, A. B. (2002). Dear White Boss . . . <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 80, No. 11, pp 76-83. Heath, K., Flynn, J., and Holt, M. D. (2014). Managing Yourself: Women, Find Your Voice. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , V. 92, No. 6, pp 118-121. Williams, G. A. and Miller, R. B. (2002). Change the Way You Persuade. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 80, No. 5, pp 64-73.
Week 9	Discussion of culture assignment Diversity (continued)	Submit and present culture assignment Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., and Silva, C. (2010). Why Men Still Get More Promotions than Women. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 88, No. 9, pp 80-85. Prime, J. and Salib, E. R. (2014). Inclusive Leadership: The View from Six Countries. <i>Catalyst</i> pp 1-16.
Week 10	Mentors Deliberate practice and lifelong learning	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 14</i> Colvin, G. (2006). What it Takes to be Great. <i>Fortune Magazine</i> . V. 154, No. 9, pp 19-22.

Table 1 continued on the next page

Week 11	Discussion of deliberate practice assignment Emotional intelligence and risk taking Presentation handouts	Submit and present deliberate practice assignment Goleman, D. (2004). What Makes a Leader? <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 82, No. 1, pp 82-91.
Week 12	Resilience Career challenges	Coutu, D. L. (2002). How Resilience Works. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> . V. 80, No. 5, pp 46-56.
Week 13	Delivering a formal presentation Changing jobs and careers	<i>Career Playbook Chapter 12</i> Submit outline for career presentation
Week 14	Career strategy presentations	Make career presentations and submit PowerPoint slides and presentation handout
Week 15	Course wrap up	Prepare for class reflections discussion

Note: Beginning in Week 2, mentoring sessions are held after every other class session.

Major Assignments

There are five major assignments in the course: two networking assignments, a company culture assessment, a deliberate practice assignment, and the preparation and presentation of the student's career strategy. The first four assignments serve as building blocks or components of the final career strategy presentation.

Networking Assignment 1: Career Strategy and Career Path

Networking can help individuals to gain mentors and sponsors and to access information and guidance (De Janasz & Forret, 2007). This assignment helps students to practice their networking skills and to gain career insights through gathering information and writing a paper about what they can do after graduation to successfully begin their career. Students are prepared for the assignment through assigned readings and a class discussion on the subject of networking. During class, students discuss how they will network to find an individual with appropriate career knowledge and potential individuals with whom they might network. The instructor provides feedback on these networking approaches, and the final choice of networking strategy and contacts is left to the student. Students are given a list of items to explore during networking, including identifying the environmental trends that affect their future career, determining the skills that will be most important to develop during the early years of their career, considering what they need to learn about themselves to be successful and happy during the first five years of their careers, identifying ways to differentiate themselves from their competition, and determining potential career paths for their early career. Students share their insights in class by making a brief presentation about what they learned.

Networking Assignment 2: Job Satisfaction, Compensation, and Lifestyle

Students use their networking skills to obtain insight and feedback from at least three people who know them well as a means to think about the relative importance of job satisfaction, compensation, and lifestyle. Students are asked to think about the importance and meaning of the work that they hope to pursue, consider person-job fit and person-organization fit, consider how important it is to learn on the job and be challenged by their work, reflect on the importance of compensation and the impact of college debt on their career, and assess how working hours, stress, work location, and work-life balance might affect their desired career choice. The students submit a paper in which they share their insights and then make a brief class presentation.

Company Culture Assessment

For this assignment, students select a company where they might like to begin their career and then research the company to determine its corporate culture. Prior to the assignment, a class is devoted to how to identify and assess corporate culture. The instructor discusses how the students can use company websites, job and recruiting websites, and networking with current and past employees to identify and assess corporate culture. Students are asked to determine the culture of the company, including its norms and the expected behaviors of employees. In addition, students must describe the company's values, including the company vision for diversity and inclusion, indicate which values they find most important, and, finally, based on the company culture, explain how a new employee should behave during the first year on the job, including how to interact with fellow employees, management, customers, suppliers, and community members. The students submit a paper on their company culture assessment and make a presentation of key findings to the class.

Deliberate Practice Assignment

Deliberate practice, including planned training and effort, is essential to fully developing an individual's skills and abilities (Ericsson, 2004). For the deliberate practice assignment, students are asked to develop a plan to more fully develop a skill that will be important to their career success. To prepare for the assignment, a class session is devoted to the concept of deliberate practice. During the class, students are asked to discuss the insights gained from their first networking assignment in regard to the skills needed for success in their future careers. The instructor and fellow students provide feedback, and then each student chooses a skill for the assignment. After selecting the skill, the student prepares a paper that explains why the skill is important, indicates the specific aspects of the skill that the student needs to improve, and includes a deliberate practice plan with the steps the student can take now, while still in school, and, later, while on the job, to further develop the skill. Students submit the paper and make presentations of their deliberate practice plans to the class.

Career Strategy: Outline, Presentation, and Handout

This assignment provides the opportunity to synthesize the semester's work into a career strategy and has three elements: a presentation outline that will be used to prepare the presentation, an oral presentation that will be made to the class and that will be videotaped, and a presentation handout that provides a summary of the main points of the presentation. The presentation has three parts: an introduction, in which the student explains his or her early career goals; the body of the presentation, in which the student discusses how to differentiate him or herself from the competition, how he or she will build a strong professional network, and one or two additional strategies that the student plans to implement; and a conclusion, in which the student summarizes his or her strategies and then fields questions from the audience. To simulate an important business presentation, guest faculty are invited to attend the presentations and to serve as an audience.

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

This course was piloted during the 2016 spring semester, with excellent results. Students were enthusiastic about the course, and data from the IDEA student rating system used by the university indicate that the course is meeting its initial goals. Table 2 provides a summary of key feedback.

Table 2: Student Progress on Course Objectives

Describe your progress in:	No apparent progress	Slight	Moderate	Substantial	Exceptional
Gaining a basic understanding of the subject (methods, principles, theories)				25.0%	75.0%
Learning to apply course material to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions				37.5%	62.5%
Developing skill in expressing yourself orally or in writing				37.5%	62.5%

Students suggested that, to further enhance the course, the professor should increase the number of mentoring sessions and involve the school's alumni in the course. Based on this feedback, increased focus will be placed on mentoring, and a LinkedIn group of current and former students will be formed to provide an ongoing student resource and to involve alumni with current students.

CONCLUSIONS

Undergraduate students often have limited insight into careers and may not develop critical skills that involve understanding corporate culture, engaging in professional networking, finding a mentor, and cultivating habits for success until after they graduate (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). The Career Strategies course was designed to help students to develop strategies to successfully begin their careers after graduation and to provide career skills that will facilitate inter-organizational mobility to enhance future career success. Due to the importance of oral communication to career success, the course also provides training to help students to improve their ability to speak confidently and effectively. Initial feedback from the pilot course has been positive, and after an additional year of

piloting, the course will become part of the required business school curriculum. Based on feedback from the pilot course, the assignments are well structured and can be used by other instructors to help students to identify career issues, cultivate career management skills, and develop an initial career strategy.

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