

Articles

Leveraging the Student Consulting Model to Create a Comprehensive Academic Program

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This paper focuses on the role of the Small Business Institute® (SBI) program in academic program expansion and sustainability by embedding the student consulting model throughout the curriculum. East Carolina University has used the SBI model since 1974, and it served as a foundational element in the creation of a comprehensive School of Entrepreneurship. A central theme has been the focus of experiential learning as a key tool in expanding curricular and co-curricular offerings. This includes integration into multiple courses and impactful community partnerships. Best practices are provided on how to utilize the SBI student-consulting model to guide program development, expansion, and longevity.

Introduction

Business programs have been involved in experiential courses for decades, but recent changes to accreditation standards and student learning trends have made these types of programs even more popular. Entrepreneurship courses have been leading the way in using this type of pedagogical approach demonstrating impact on student skills and mindset development through real-world experiences (Kassean et al., 2015). A particular type of experiential-learning opportunity is through student-led, team consulting projects. These opportunities are not only valuable for students but can lead to more impactful community engagement and charitable gifts (Barber et al., 2021). One organization with a focus on the student consulting model is the Small Business Institute® (SBI) which was first piloted in 1972 with support from the Small Business Administration and has been continuously used in select business schools for decades (Small Business Institute, 2020). The leading universities affiliated with the national SBI program have historically provided management assistance and vital support to firms and offers students valuable experience (Bauer, 1978).

East Carolina University (ECU) was an early adopter of the SBI model starting our program in 1974. This program has been delivered through a Small Business Management course in the College of Business and thousands of students have completed projects for hundreds of small business clients since its inception. Most important, this program has been used as a critical outreach program for the regional business community from the College of Business. The value of our SBI program has been acknowledged on

our campus by being recognized as a university-level institute and led to a named School of Entrepreneurship.

Since 1974 ECU has had five SBI program directors. It began with R.B. Keusch, the founding director of SBI at ECU. He provided the initial framework and mentorship to set the foundation for the program. While not always formal, there have been smooth leadership transitions throughout this time and the university has maintained its commitment to the SBI model. The early support included prime building space, financial investment, and administrative support. Communicating the benefits to the Dean and receiving informal and formal support led to early resiliency of the program at ECU. The most recent transition included a multi-year plan and intentional training and development opportunities for the targeted faculty member. This training included both in-house professional development elements but also national opportunities to develop leadership skills in key academic organizations including the national SBI. Our faculty have been involved in various leadership roles in the national SBI and received various accolades along the way. These awards include national Showcase and Mentor awards and long standing success in the Project-of-the-Year competition, placing nationally in the top three consistently over the past two decades (Rudd, 2020).

Curricular Expansion

The evolution of the ECU entrepreneurship program can be linked to the success of the SBI and our willingness to use it as a foundation for planning our curricular and co-curricular programs. We have demonstrated the importance of embedding the SBI model within a course to ensure

a Steve Childers was ECU SBI Director from 1995-2000; Michael Harris from 2000-2019; Dennis Barber from 2019 to present.

longevity of the SBI program at ECU. However, for an extended time frame we only focused on a single course, Small Business Management. This course is the longest running student-consulting based course in the program. This is one of the few, possibly only, courses in the College of Business that is writing intensive, service learning and has associated lab hours (ECU, 2020). This course has served hundreds of clients with tens of thousands of student consulting hours over more than four decades.

As we designed the Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurship (BSE) degree and launched it in 2019, we expanded the utilization of the student-led, team consulting model into other courses. Our BSE includes an experiential component and students in the program must choose one of the experiential courses as part of the degree requirements. The Small Business Management course is one of those options. The other two are Managing the Family Business and an Internship course.

The first expansion of the SBI model beyond the Small Business Management course into an additional full semester course was in the Managing the Family Business (MFB) course. With an overhaul of the course requirements, the course received a service-learning designation. This designation is applied to courses that meet the three following broad guidelines

1. "Service-learning is structured within a course and has a formal, academic curriculum that is rooted in the discipline in which the course is being offered;
2. The course contains a set of organized community-based learning activities through which students directly serve a constituency as a means to address an identified community need;
3. The course provides structured opportunities for students to formally connect their service activities to the course curriculum and to broader social issues through reflective methods" (Community Engaged Learning, 2020).

There is university support from the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement for faculty and students in service-learning courses, which includes orientation sessions, community partner identification, liability insurance, and assessments.

The SBI model is combined with professional development activities in MFB. Students learn as they go about the nuances and potential issues in family firms around estate planning, succession planning, family communication and administration. Students are matched with multi-generation family businesses from the region to conduct a full semester consulting project culminating with a written report and presentation. Reports from this course have placed consistently in the Top 3 in the SBI Project-of-the-Year competition since the expansion of the model into this course. This expansion spurred the creation of a client portal. This portal helps provide a connection vehicle between the College and the region to engage with rural business owners.

The other experiential course in the degree program is the Internship course. Since the launch of the BSE, the internship course has been closely aligned with the RISE29 program at ECU (East Carolina University, 2020). RISE29 is a holistic approach to job creation and retention in eastern

North Carolina and is funded through a \$1M grant from the Golden Leaf Foundation. RISE29 students begin their journeys with a business idea, a technological innovation, or a desire to help a community. Advancing through the program, students are placed into teams before receiving research and development support and business model mentoring. Teams then follow one of two paths: launching a microenterprise or enacting an established business continuity plan. Newly launched microenterprises provide an economic boost to the region, while continuity plans may include succession or expansion proposals, through student-consulting projects, for firms considered vital for community success. RISE29 created a unique pipeline for extending the relationship with clients, and these practices won the USASBE Co-curricular Innovation and the SBI Best Practices awards in 2020.

Two other courses, as part of the BSE, have also used the student consulting model: Small Business Strategy (SBS) and New Venture Launch (NVL). The SBS employs the model and focuses on projects related to strategic decisions such as pricing, differentiation, and growth. Students spend the first half of the semester learning strategic management theory before engaging in the consulting projects. The NVL course employs the student consulting model for large businesses in the region. The student projects focus on related or spinoff company opportunities for their clients. Many of the projects are tailored to helping corporations integrate (forward and/or backward) in their supply chains.

The SBI and student consulting models have remained integrated into the curriculum and expanded into multiple courses and attracted grant funding. Not only has the model been embedded for a long period of time, but it has also now become a central tenant for the experiential learning opportunities provided in the BSE. The faculty have also engaged in the important of entrepreneurship pedagogy research to disseminate, assess and evaluate experiential learning and the student consulting model (Barber et al., 2020, 2021; McMillan & Barber, 2020).

Program Expansion

As discussed, the SBI program has long served as one of the core elements of the ECU entrepreneurship curriculum. However, it was one of the foundations that paved the way for a substantial structural change to our entrepreneurship program with the creation of a new named school of entrepreneurship. The Miller School of Entrepreneurship was launched in 2015 and currently houses the SBI program and numerous other experiential courses featuring client projects, as mentioned earlier (East Carolina University, 2020). The Miller School serves as a regional hub for preparing students to take an entrepreneurial mindset and skill set into their communities. In addition to its unique entrepreneurship curriculum, the Miller School links with key strategic partners to offer co-curricular programs that help serve as a catalyst for regional transformation. Having a named School has served as a catalyst for a number of curriculum improvements and programs.

One of the first initiatives of the Miller School was the creation of the previously mentioned BSE degree, and the experiential nature of the SBI program drove the curriculum

planning efforts. The BSE degree has a high level of engaged learning and is designed to provide students with a strong foundation in the entrepreneurial skill set and mindset needed to develop and launch a new venture. Students will be able to separate ideas from opportunities and develop the skills and knowledge to create new ventures and become involved in entrepreneurial organizations. They will also have opportunities to apply their entrepreneurial knowledge through experiential learning activities. This may include work on team-based projects, consulting opportunities, and internships.

Experiential learning is featured substantially in this curriculum. All of these interactive experiences will allow our students to develop the knowledge to act on their ideas and create viable enterprises. Upon graduation, we expect some of our students to become viable entrepreneurs and start new businesses. Others will use their skills and knowledge to forge an entrepreneurial career in either small businesses, family businesses, or even large corporations.

The creation of a named School represents a significant institutional investment and has provided the driving force for numerous other activities, including the Pirate Entrepreneurship Pitch Competition, Summer Innovation Academy, and a rural accelerator program. In each instance, there is a strong reliance on experiential activities and connections to the regional business community. For example, community judges and mentors are featured prominently in the pitch competition and accelerator program along with opportunities to connect with resources in the region through the RISE29 program. These partnerships are critical to broaden ECU's reach and allows us to have a significant impact on our students and our region. Additionally, these connections provide the opportunity to develop and test our pedagogical models. Great efforts are made to connect our students and community partners and develop mutually beneficial programming. This program sets the stage for students to make community connections and become the next generation of business owners (Barber et al., 2021).

In addition to the creation of the Miller School, we leveraged the SBI program to create an endowed small business resource center to complement our curricular and co-curricular programs. A strategic investment was made to endow the Crisp Small Business Resource Center in 2020, and it provides students and the surrounding community with best practices and proven knowledge required to start and sustain enterprises in our service region. Distinct center activities include specialized research reports and consulting projects, community workshops, and executive education. In addition, the Crisp Center helps convert curricular programs in the Miller School into actionable ideas and ventures created by students from all academic fields. Efforts focus on working collaboratively across campus and with regional partners to provide programming for students and regional business owners.

The Crisp Center can help grow existing activities and offer new programming to support entrepreneurial growth in the region. This ranges from student consulting projects to workshops for student entrepreneurs and business owners. Research shows that co-curricular programming drives business startups, creates relationships within communities to leverage resources, and stimulates the creation of an

entrepreneurial culture across campus and your service region. Pairing a strong mission-focused center with a high-quality academic degree program will enable the Miller School to serve our students and better address our university's mission of regional transformation.

All these programs contribute to the Miller School's comprehensive design focused on experiential learning, which has been embedded in our programs since the inception of the SBI at ECU in 1974. Through our rather humble beginning of offering a single course using the SBI model almost five decades ago, we are now uniquely positioned among just a handful of universities across the country to have a named school and center dedicated to entrepreneurship and small business by building, leveraging and expanding this model.

Best Practices

Program expansion can be a daunting proposition on many campuses. It requires strategic planning, curricular development, and resource allocation. Additionally, these expansion efforts must align with school or college-level goals and university priorities to be successful. Any faculty or administrator interested in undertaking this challenge should be aware of the importance of using curriculum to drive this process. A focus on embedding the model in curriculum and using curricular expansions mitigates the risk of losing the SBI impact and programs as there is turnover in faculty. The following best practices focus on how to leverage the SBI program as a catalyst for program expansion.

Curriculum Drives Program Expansion

As a higher education institution it is critical to use curriculum to drive programmatic changes and expansions. This was a significant factor in the creation of the Miller School. A focus on educational programs that align with your school/college's learning goals and drive student enrollment helps ensure better resource allocation. Additionally, curriculum linkages require faculty commitment and often signal a more long-term investment capable of surviving the volatility in today's universities. Developing a comprehensive program requires time and commitment that is generally not possible without a strong connection to the classroom.

Course offerings constitute an important part of program expansion and can include a degree, concentration, minor, or certificate. These academic programs form the core from which you build co-curricular and community engagement activities. We have leveraged the SBI model to create multiple courses based on consulting projects and community connections. These courses, as seen in [Table 1](#), serve as the foundation to educate students and prepare them for co-curricular opportunities such as competitions, clinics, incubators and accelerators, and internships. Without a curricular base your program can fall into the trap of becoming an eclectic mix of creative activities with limited student impact and institutional support.

Two of the required courses in the degree have used the SBI Model. Another required course, ENTR 4212, can easily deploy the model to identify and develop solutions for a

Table 1. BSE Course List

Course Number	Name	Notes	Used Elements of SBI Model
<i>Required</i>			
ENTR 3500	Entrepreneurship Essentials		
FINA 3500	Money Management for Entrepreneurs		
MKTG 3500	Entrepreneurial Opportunities and Marketing		
ENTR 4212	Innovation and Opportunity Assessment		X
ENTR 4222	Entrepreneurial Finance		
ENTR 4232	Professional Selling		
ENTR 4242	Entrepreneurial Strategy	WI	X
ENTR 4252	New Venture Launch	WI	X
ENTR 4500	Entrepreneurial Business Planning	WI	
<i>Select two:</i>			
ENTR 4262	Small Business Management	WI, SL	X
ENTR 4272	Managing the Family Business	SL	X
ENTR 4955	Topics in Entrepreneurship		
ENTR 4995	Internship		X

WI: Writing-Intensive
SL: Service-learning

problem for a live client. Three of our “choose from” courses have employed the model. As you can see, the model is deeply embedded in the BSE.

Experiential Courses Impact Student Learning

Accreditation plays an important role in academic planning. For business schools AACSB standards impact all elements of curricular and co-curricular programming. Standard 4 encourages the creation of a curriculum that promotes and fosters innovation, experiential learning, and develops a lifelong learning mindset (AACSB, 2020). The SBI model embodies this standard and provides the building block for program expansion in the field of entrepreneurship and small business. According to a 2016 article in AACSB’s BizEd magazine, disruptions in business and business education mean that business schools must adjust traditional practices to be a part of the new learning environment. Specifically, the AACSB article instructs business schools to:

- “be catalysts for innovation: drive economic development and support innovation and business creation...They’re launching incubators that support and commercialize inventions; they’re creating multidisciplinary programs that give students the broad skill sets they need to turn ideas into reality;
- be hubs for lifelong learning: Business schools need to position themselves as institutions that will support students throughout their careers;
- be co-creators of knowledge: In the future, business school research must be as focused on practice as it is on theory. And schools themselves must reach out to industry to become conveners and partners in knowledge creation, rather than simply being suppliers;
- cultivate positions at the intersection of academia

and practice: they need to be partners with industry as they co-educate managers, co-create ideas, and co-found new businesses;

- measure their success by a different set of metrics. Media rankings that prioritize graduates’ salaries will be supplemented by metrics that consider the number of jobs schools help create or the number of new businesses they help launch” (Iannarelli, 2016).

Experiential courses feature highly engaged learning activities with a strong focus on application of knowledge. This often improves understanding and comprehension which directly impacts student learning. Research shows that 21st century learners are motivated by interactive experiences which leads to stronger student commitment (Barber et al., 2020; Kassean et al., 2015). Additionally, these types of courses provide students opportunities to practice critical skills that translate well in the business world. They also offer experiences that students can highlight on their resumes and prepare them for an entrepreneurial career.

In our case, we used the SBI program to provide the foundation to revamp existing courses and create new ones, build an entrepreneurship degree, and launch a dedicated School. While not all institutions may choose this same path, our example showcases the extent to which the SBI can be used for program development and expansion. Regardless, it is critical to focus on student learning as you expand your program and experiential courses provide the foundation for student success and retention.

Meaningful Community Engagement and Regional Impact

Some of the keywords in AACSB’s mission include en-

agement, innovation and impact. Similarly, the mission of the SBI is to serve as the linkage between business, education, and community. The consistency in the mission of these organizations is notable particularly in the call for impactful community engagement. According to Standard 9 from AACSB a school should demonstrate positive societal impact through initiatives and activities consistent with its mission, strategies, and expected outcomes (AACSB, 2020). This SBI model offers business schools a methodology that can lead to significant mission-driven community engagement.

The national SBI organization can offer a turnkey approach to creating a client-based consulting program. This may start simply with a strategic linkage in a singular course. Then as you consider expanding your program the SBI can be connected with multiple course offerings and integrated into co-curricular programming. The creation of the Miller School called for a comprehensive approach to program expansion and the SBI has been a critical element in this evolution. One constant throughout this process has been the impact of our SBI program on the regional business community. ECU has completed client-based consulting projects each year since 1974 and this impact has been noted in multiple AACSB accreditation visits. With this new standard and a call for greater emphasis on societal impact this type of program can serve as a catalyst for outreach efforts in business schools. In a typical academic year, our student teams will complete consulting projects in multiple courses for 25-30 small business clients and accumulate over 8,000 fieldwork hours. These projects provided a highly engaging learning experience for our students and a valuable service for our regional business community. With this new standard and a call for greater emphasis on societal impact this type of program can serve as a catalyst for outreach efforts in business schools.

Cross-Campus Connections

As previously discussed, the Miller School is involved in a grant funded program focused on rural entrepreneurship as a tool for regional transformation. The RISE29 program features students from across the campus connected by an entrepreneurial mindset and a desire to positively impact local communities. The SBI model is highly integrated into this program and the focus of the internship is on completing tailored consulting projects for participating businesses. These projects include strategic recommendations aimed at business expansion and job growth, with a strong emphasis on assisting participating business owners with the implementation process.

One of the unique program elements is the creation of multidisciplinary teams with students from complementary academic majors across our campus. Students participating in these internships are from diverse majors such as entrepreneurship, business, engineering, communications, art, and education. Often, they are enrolled in the entrepreneurship certificate program in the Miller School which includes students from over 25 majors. The diverse student interns bring together complementary skills needed to solve challenging problems for our clients, as well as providing the foundation for building an entrepreneurial cul-

ture across our campus.

While the Miller School is housed in the College of Business at ECU, it has linkages with programs throughout the university. The importance of campus connections is interwoven into our organizational structure with our internal steering committee consisting of faculty from multiple disciplines. Additionally, the university has formed a campus-wide council focused on entrepreneurial and innovative activities. This level of coordination has allowed us to develop a more comprehensive approach to community engagement and economic development; the SBI has been an important component of these efforts. This intentionality has allowed us to develop a School strategically connected to the overall university mission.

Success Stories and Alumni Support

The final best practice focuses on sharing success stories and celebrating positive experiences from your program. The SBI provides multiple opportunities to showcase the work of your students in the business community. Each year the national SBI organization leads a Project-of-the-Year Competition that allows participating universities and colleges throughout the country to submit their best consulting projects for external review. The ECU SBI program has been involved in this competition for the past two decades and experienced a good deal of success. These awards have allowed us to share success stories with our clients and provide impactful branding opportunities. Other methods to promote success include student highlights, client testimonials, student competitions, and thought leadership opportunities. In addition to its value in marketing and branding, these stories can also play an important role in accreditation efforts and student recruiting.

Alumni serve as a powerful tool as you build your program. Traditionally, this would focus primarily on development efforts and resource attainment. Certainly, supportive alumni play a critically important role in fundraising. However, many are genuinely interested in student learning and providing networks that support students as they transition into the professional world (Barber et al., 2021).

A strategic effort in the Miller School has been to develop multiple advisory councils throughout our state consisting of dedicated alumni and supporters. These councils provide us with valuable mentorship, diverse types of business expertise, and access to critical resources. They also help ensure the relevance of our programs and provide emerging industry trends we use to plan our future. Advisory councils have been instrumental in helping us build a unique and comprehensive School; our overall impact would not be as significant without their involvement (Paynter et al., 2020).

Conclusion

It was our objective to demonstrate how the SBI program can be used for program development and expansion. We used the SBI model and its core principles to help drive the evolution of our program from a focus on a central, singular course to a dedicated School of Entrepreneurship. This growth has been intentional and focused on key elements linked to the SBI.

First, we focused on growing our number of high-level

experiential courses, followed by complementary co-curricular offerings that provide new opportunities for our students and strategic community connections. Authentic student learning has been emphasized throughout our journey, and this has allowed us to gain commitment from both our students and faculty.

Likewise, it has been critically important to develop strategic partnerships with our business community and across our campus. This requires a concerted effort to build mutually beneficial opportunities that positively impact student learning and solves pressing issues directly impacting regional stakeholders, particularly emerging entrepreneurs, and existing small business owners. And to accomplish this important goal, campus partners must unite to share talents and resources. Impactful community engagement involves complex issues which require new types of solutions. These solutions require a new paradigm that is only possible through an innovative multidisciplinary approach. And when this happens, it is important to acknowledge and reward these efforts. This is challenging work and positive impact should be celebrated by everyone involved.

Many universities have a service component embedded in their mission. Simultaneously, accreditation organiza-

tions, like AACSB, are pushing for more societal impact from business schools. A simple but powerful element of the SBI is that it brings together faculty, students, and the business community for this very purpose. This unified support and interconnectedness provides a compelling case for deans and other university administrators, and their support is critical for program sustainability. It also helps ensure appropriate resources allocation particularly during challenging times.

In closing, we encourage faculty and program builders to consider how the SBI can play a role in your future planning efforts. There are great benefits to adopting this program, particularly when you understand how to leverage it within your curriculum to generate and support program expansion. These best practices have been critically important in building our program, and we believe this can be replicated by others willingly to make the same level of strategic investments and faculty commitment.

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