



Aspen Undergraduate Business Education Consortium: Inaugural Convening

March 19-20, 2012

The George Washington University School of Business
Washington, D.C.

On March 19-20, 2012 thirty colleges and universities – both national and international – gathered for the inaugural convening of the Aspen Undergraduate Business Education Consortium. Teams from each school, made up of deans, faculty, and academic officers, exchanged curricular and extra-curricular ideas that tie together liberal learning¹ and business training in ways that resonate for today’s students and for their employers.

The [Aspen Institute Business & Society Program](#) is partnering on this initiative with the three primary authors of [Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education](#) (Jossey-Bass, January 2011), Anne Colby, Tom Ehrlich, and Bill Sullivan. The book offers five recommendations to help undergraduate institutions more fully prepare students for lives as responsible, engaged citizens—who can question assumptions, think critically, and understand the place of business in larger institutional contexts.

The agenda of the two-day convening called on participants to do four things:

1. **Map:** What does a business education steeped in liberal learning look like in practice? How can collaboration between participating Consortium institutions contribute to progress?
2. **Teach:** Participants took the role of “student” or “teacher” in mini-samples of teaching that explicitly tie liberal learning and business education.
3. **Tell Stories:** Stories are a powerful vehicle to facilitate the exchange of ideas and to build up momentum and courage. Participants shared “success stories” (or works in progress) that show how change actually happened on their campuses.
4. **Plan:** Participants spent time with their campus teams charting next steps and determining how to move forward with their campus-based pilot projects (see pg. 3).

At the convening, invited guests offered “intriguing inputs” to the conversation. Walter Isaacson, President and CEO of The Aspen Institute and author of *Steve Jobs*; Gary Knell, President and CEO of NPR; Fred Dust of IDEO; Debra Humphreys of AAC&U; Mike Poerksen of Ernst & Young; and Steve Rainey of KPMG – each challenged participants to examine issues at the heart of the Consortium through a different lens.

What follows are ideas that participants identified as key themes – and a quick overview of integrative pilot projects underway at participating institutions.



¹“The purpose of liberal learning is to enable students to make sense of the world and their place in it, preparing them to use knowledge and skills as means to engage responsibly with the life of their times.” (*Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*, p. 60).

Key Takeaways

Myths matter. Myths – sometimes connected to an organization’s founding or history – exist in all institutions. Myths, by definition, aren’t necessarily true or false; once uncovered, sometimes myths get reaffirmed – and sometimes debunked.

Calling up myths can help build the case for change. Fred Dust (Partner, IDEO) offered an example from a major retailer where he has worked with managers who bolster new initiatives by arguing “this is what [our founder] would have done.”

Yet sometimes myths need refreshing. One that had resonance for participants is: “Liberal arts students are explorers and dreamers; business students are directive and just want a job.” This particular myth was debunked at one school, where an [integrative capstone](#) offered to business majors during winter break of their senior year proved popular – even though many students already had jobs and so the class was not a resume boost.

Know the user; follow the user. This theme resonated with participants, who voiced unease about their understanding of students. Commented one participant: “We don’t actually know why they chose [our school]; we don’t know what they value. We’ve never asked.” At the same time, Fred told stories from client work that demonstrated pitfalls of surveying due to the reality that there are “a lot of aspirations in questions and people are actually going to try to match up to those aspirations” – and he encouraged participants to rely instead on observation and “eavesdropping” (e.g., at [RateMyProfessor.com](#)).

“We actually believe that if you want to understand your user – understand your student – the one thing you shouldn’t do is go out and ask them what they want.”

–Fred Dust, IDEO

Expand thinking about who to bring into discussions. Fred talked about upstart organizations like [General Assembly](#) – that has become a go-to resource on executive education.

Beyond traditional “experts,” what new voices can/should be brought into conversations on campuses around undergraduate curriculum development?

Clarify the ends. Participants voiced a need to clarify terms and “what it is we are talking about” – is it liberal arts? Liberal learning? The humanities? An [AAC&U document](#) may be useful in distinguishing frequently-confused terms.

Joint projects can help break down barriers. Participants shared challenges on the road to integration – and many seemed rooted in a divide between business and liberal arts faculty. Organizational realities, like salary differentials, can make collaboration difficult. Complicating the picture are cultural differences – e.g., the difference of how each view the value of “applied learning.” Still ...

Topic-based courses or course clusters are a proven vehicle for fostering stronger ties between diverse faculty – while exposing students to alternative, non-market perspectives. Courses/clusters on [water](#); [design thinking](#); and ethanol (stay tuned to [CasePlace.org](#) for more information) are just three examples. Special projects can also play a useful role; one participating school found a “unifying force” through participation in the [UN Global Compact’s PRME initiative](#).

“Teach for a sense of salience.” In teaching, it may be helpful to think not only about teaching students what we want them to learn (i.e., learning outcomes) but also about what we’d like them to be like (i.e., helping them develop a sense of professional identity). Anne Colby, co-author of *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*, shared with the group the notion of [“teaching for a sense of salience”](#) – a concept used in the training of nurses so that nurses can learn to focus on key data points in rapidly-changing and open-ended clinical situations.

Use employer data to help “make the case.” [Data from AAC&U](#) demonstrates that employers value skills and habits of mind associated with liberal learning. Two recruiters at the event gave concrete examples – citing everything from interactions with international co-workers to managing a team of associates later along in one’s career. But big questions remain. Asked one participant: “do moral character and personal values matter in hiring decisions?” and, if yes, asked another: “how can a student demonstrate the desired qualities to an interviewer?”

Participating Institutions and Pilot Projects

The Consortium is designed with a strong action learning component: as part of participation, each school is undertaking a pilot project that attempts to further the integration of liberal learning and business education.

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| Alma College | Conduct an external program review. |
| Augsburg College | Reintroduce a revamped “Business, Government and Society” undergraduate course and rethink the existing Keystone Course. |
| Augustana College | Better integrate with liberal studies gateway and capstone experiences. |
| Babson College | Design a multi-disciplinary signature learning experience for upper level students that is issue-based and experiential. |
| Bentley University | Develop an institutional mechanism that will allow faculty to develop and offer clustered courses on topics that cross business and A&S (easily and regularly). |
| Copenhagen Business School | Create a new BSc program for business humanities; engage in close collaboration between academics and corporate partners within international business. |
| Dominican University of CA | Create an intentional reflection experience that ties together various cross-disciplinary, engaged/experiential learning components for students. |
| ESADE Business School | Integrate the liberal arts into the curriculum of a traditional BBA. |
| Franklin & Marshall College | Create a 3-course prerequisite sequence with quantitative, writing, and philosophy components – so students can develop a multiple perspective framework. |
| George Washington University | Begin an in-depth process for curriculum reform. |
| Georgetown University | Develop and implement a joint program for undergraduates with the School of Foreign Service. |
| Georgia College & State Univ. | Review the undergraduate business curriculum and create goals for the business core that are consistent with the university’s mission as a liberal arts university. |
| La Salle University | Develop additional faculty discussion groups relating to integrating the liberal arts and the professional schools. |
| New York University | Work with A&S professors to develop new courses; develop faculty teaching capabilities. |
| Northwestern University | Coordinate/rationalize undergraduate business offerings. |
| Philadelphia University | Create a bridge between two parallel and significant initiatives: a redesign of the business core curriculum and a university-wide revision of general education. |
| Santa Clara University | Close the Pathways assessment feedback loop with particular attention to the intersections of liberal and business learning. |
| Southwestern University | Design a center or institute in which innovation can be facilitated at the intersection between liberal learning and “good” business. |
| Syracuse University | A multi-year sustainable enterprise program recognizing that solving sustainability problems require integrative thinking (= Sustainable Enterprise Fellow Program). |
| The College of William & Mary | Further three pilots: design thinking, sustainability, and social entrepreneurship. |
| University of Denver | Launch the new first year gateway to business course to set the stage for business and provide a bridge between liberal arts and business. |
| University of Michigan | Design an “Introduction to Business” course that emphasizes integrative thinking to look at business problems and opportunities. |
| University of Pennsylvania | Create “cross-current” classes which are topic-based and team-taught by faculty across programs. |
| University of Richmond | Spread the business curriculum over four years of study <i>and</i> spread A&S courses. |
| University of St. Gallen | Enhance interdisciplinary cooperation between core disciplines and humanities and social sciences. |
| University of St. Thomas | Scale up our bridge course from two to six sections per year. |
| University of Virginia | Work with other departments at the University of Virginia to grow our Leadership Minor in terms of size and scope. |
| Wake Forest University | Design and deliver a new design thinking course. |

Participating institutions with pilot projects still in development

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; University of Notre Dame

Next Steps

Over the next year, each campus team will work on their projects – with continued input and support from the Consortium. This same group of schools will meet for a second time in March 2013 at the University of Denver, Daniels College of Business (March 11-12, 2013).

To maintain momentum through the year, The Aspen Institute Business & Society Program is calling on participants to help us:

1. **Connect** – We can provide virtual convening space in the form of web-conferences. Topics that seem top-of-mind for participants include dealing with obstacles to integration, dealing with resource constraints, and learning from assessments.
2. **Disseminate** – We will continue to share, via our website for teaching materials, classroom resources (articles, syllabi, cases) that integrate liberal learning and business education – or build the case for doing so. Please visit our [portal](#) on our website CasePlace.org.
3. **Further define** – how can collaboration across schools help move the needle on individual campuses? What specific goals and objectives would be most productive to guide our time in Denver?

We appreciate your leadership and support!

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How are we training our young minds? How are we training young business leaders for the future? Are we following that one-note tune of market efficiency theory...or are we actually training students to be leaders for the future who think very deeply about the societies they are embedded in...?

- Doug Guthrie,
Dean, The George Washington University
School of Business

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