

# Teaching The ‘Soft Skills’: A Professional Development Curriculum To Enhance The Employability Skills Of Business Graduates

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## ABSTRACT

*Today’s business climate requires that management recruits not only know the technical aspects of their jobs, but also possess communication, teambuilding and leadership skills. Most business school curricula, however, focus only on technical skills, and do not address the ‘soft skills’ in a formal setting or on a consistent basis. As graduates compete for fewer jobs, business schools must develop creative and innovative ways to give their graduates a competitive edge. Thus, the purpose of this article is to present a curriculum that has been implemented in the business program at South Carolina State University to enhance and balance students’ soft skills with their intellectual development.*

**Keywords:** soft skills, leadership and professional development

## INTRODUCTION

The use of technology and other environmental forces translates to fewer opportunities for recent and soon-to-be graduates of bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in business administration. Thus, as graduates compete for fewer jobs, business schools must develop creative and innovative ways to give their graduates a competitive edge. Furthermore, the current business climate now requires that management recruits not only know the technical aspects of their jobs, but also possess excellent communication, teambuilding and leadership skills.

There are many performance indicators of a successful business program, but one that is most evident is the quality of its graduates. Providing a quality management education program to produce competitive graduates and business leaders involves a continuous process of curriculum review and enhancements. Although all management education graduates may not become leaders, they all should have some basic skill competencies and be capable of functioning in a global and diverse business environment. Thus, leadership development should be an intricate component of the management education curriculum; not just a by-product. The aim of a Leadership and Professional Development Program (LAPD) is to fulfill that component of the management education curriculum with a focus on ‘soft skills’.

Soft skills include a collection of communication, interpersonal, teambuilding and other business skills that today’s employers value in hiring new recruits. Unfortunately, most business school curricula focus only on technical skills, and do not address the ‘soft skills’ in a formal setting or on a consistent basis. Too often, this aspect of student development is left to career development centers or not dealt with at all. The authors believe that business schools that incorporate these skills into the curriculum will likely have graduates who are better prepared for success in the workplace. Thus, the purpose of this article is to present a curriculum that has been implemented in the business program at South Carolina State University to enhance and balance students’ soft skills with their intellectual development.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

There is no consensus among the various stakeholders (employers, academicians, career advisors and students) on the degree of emphasis that should be placed on soft skills in an academic setting. As a result, educators must overcome many obstacles to implement a curriculum that include these skills. The pay off, however, will be graduates who have a strong theoretical understanding paired with a portfolio of soft skills that make them more employable in their profession.

In a Wall Street Journal article entitled “*Top Schools Struggle to Teach Soft Skills*,” Ronald Alsop (2004) indicates that “soft skills, such as leadership, communication and the ability to work in teams, are just as important as the ‘hard stuff’ to recruiters in the evaluation of potential employees.” Despite the debate over whether leadership skills can be taught or the degree it should be emphasized, a number of the nation’s leading graduate business programs view soft skill development as an important aspect to the success of their graduates. For example, MBA programs such as Yale, Vanderbilt, University of Chicago, Stanford, M.I.T., Carnegie Mellon, and others have incorporated innovative elements of leadership development into their respective curricula to build and strengthen soft skills. A survey conducted by the National Association of Black Accountants (2006) further demonstrates the need for professional development of college students. The results indicate that many students believe the development of “soft skills,” such as communication, interpersonal, networking, and time management are key factors in the progression of their careers.

In the workplace, employees should have effective communication and soft skills because they improve workplace relationships as well as workplace efficiency (Donnovon Outten, 2006). When there is intense competition for jobs, soft skills can mean the difference between getting a job offer and not getting one (Richard Serby, 2003). It’s not enough to just have strong technical knowledge. Ken Kay, president of the *Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*, advocates infusing soft skills into education. He says “young people must also be able to work comfortably with people from other cultures, solve problems creatively, write and speak well, think in a multidisciplinary way, and evaluate information critically.”

In the 2007 QS Recruiter recruiters ranked communication and people skills as most important in considering a new candidate (Geraghty, 2008). Thus, it appears that more emphasis is being placed on communication, interpersonal and leadership traits and less on academics or technical skills.

## **THE LAPD MODEL**

South Carolina State University is a small university located in rural South Carolina. The business program consists of approximately 700 students. In the early 1990s, the School of Business implemented three professional development courses that all business majors were required to take. After experimenting for 10 years with the structure and content of the curriculum, a model evolved and was implemented in 2002 (Exhibit 1). The Leadership and Professional Development Program (LAPD) is designed to equip students with the ‘soft skills’ necessary to successfully advance in their careers as responsible corporate and community citizens. Students are exposed to practical, professional, and experiential knowledge to complement business content and academic skills. The curriculum is designed to ensure that students are adequately prepared to meet and master the challenges of the professional world by complementing their ‘book learning’ with marketable life skills.

The LAPD Program includes a regimen of courses that incorporates written assignments, team building projects, presentations, discussions, time management, web portfolio, service-learning projects, a mentoring program, an image and self analysis, company analysis, mock interviews, ethics, a dining out experience, role playing, involvement in an experiential learning assignment and an Executive Speaker Series. (Exhibit 2). Sometimes students are placed in positions outside of their comfort zone, but they are encouraged to accept these challenges as unique learning experiences.

*The LAPD MODEL* is based on multi-levels of leadership and accountability training including total development (personal and professional) of the individual. It is a unique and innovative curriculum to enhance and supplement the academic experience of students consisting of: (1) a series of modules taught in 3 levels of

leadership and professional development courses to develop competencies in key areas that are necessary to be successful and advance in the workplace; (2) an experiential learning requirement where students obtain skills to develop their professional maturity in handling the pressures of a diverse and competitive workplace; (3) an Executive Speaker Series, where students participate in a roundtable and hear weekly lectures on real world experiences from government, community and corporate leaders; and (4) leadership development workshops on various subjects such as business attire, business and dining etiquette, and conflict resolution. The series of courses consist of a self-development course during the sophomore year; an interpersonal development course that focuses on teambuilding during the junior year; and a leadership development course during the senior year, each with specific competencies. The three professional development courses meet one-hour each week. The experiential learning course may be taken any time after completing the sophomore course, but is recommended during the junior year. Students meeting certain requirements may also complete an internship (3 hours credits) as an elective. The courses and competencies in each course are described in Exhibit 3.

### **Executive Speaker Series (ESS)**

The Executive Speaker Series (ESS) was implemented as a component of the LAPD Program to expose students to the viewpoints of leaders who are on the cutting edge of business, industry and government. All students enrolled in the professional development courses are required to attend the weekly ESS program as a laboratory requirement. Attendance at, and reports on the ESS programs account for 20% of each student's final grade in each course.

Since inception of the series, key executives from major corporations and governmental units have provided their professional insights on various topics. In addition, they provide students with key points on developing skill sets that are needed to become a successful leader. Each Wednesday, executives spend the day interacting with students and faculty in roundtable discussions, a general assembly at noon, a luncheon and a radio interview that is broadcast to the local community. To emphasize the importance of image, students attending the ESS program must be professionally dressed in dark suits.

The ESS program is a partnership between participating companies and the B-School. It supports the School's mission, which is to "*provide quality management education and leadership development to produce competitive graduates for a global and diverse environment.*" Executives from companies such as Monsanto, Pfizer, Springs Industries, BOWATER, Ernst & Young, BellSouth, Black Enterprise, SCANA, Sonoco, among others have participated in the series.

### **IMPACT OF LAPD PROGRAM**

Feedback from students, recruiters, and others outside the Business Program indicates the LAPD program has had a significant impact on the way others perceive students, as well as the way they perceive themselves. For example, since inception of the program, recruiters indicate students are more polished in their interviews; the number of students completing internships has increased by 40 %; and student placement at graduation has increased by 38%.

To assess students' perception of the LAPD program, a survey of students who had completed the three levels of professional development courses was conducted in the Spring 2008. Fifty-five students in three senior level courses responded to the questionnaire. Using a five-point Likert Scale, students were asked to indicate their perception of how much of their current knowledge and experiences would they attribute to the Leadership and Professional Development Program. Overall, students believe the LAPD program had a positive impact on their business savvy and preparation for the workplace. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: LAPD Assessment**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
	1	2	3	4	5
As a result of the LAPD Program,					
1. My career direction is more focused and defined	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>16.4%</b>	3 <b>16.4%</b>	4 <b>47.3%</b>	5 <b>18.2%</b>
2. I have registered with the Career Center and have taken advantage of the interviews and other career preparation sessions offered by the Center.	1 <b>5.5%</b>	2 <b>7.3%</b>	3 <b>18.2%</b>	4 <b>41.8%</b>	5 <b>27.3%</b>
3. I understand the importance of ethics and the role ethics play with a company or organization.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>0.0%</b>	3 <b>1.82%</b>	4 <b>32.7%</b>	5 <b>63.6%</b>
4. I have a sense of my own ethical behavior and values and how to best demonstrate them for the good of the organization.	1 <b>1.85%</b>	2 <b>0.0%</b>	3 <b>3.7%</b>	4 <b>38.9%</b>	5 <b>55.6%</b>
5. The Executive Speaker Series provided key insights on skill sets I need to be successful.	1 <b>3.6%</b>	2 <b>3.6%</b>	3 <b>5.5%</b>	4 <b>50.9%</b>	5 <b>36.4%</b>
6. I am more organized in my work and my personal life since learning about time management skills and employing these skills in my daily life.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>5.5%</b>	3 <b>9.1%</b>	4 <b>54.6%</b>	5 <b>29.1%</b>
7. I have learned about different leadership styles and the advantages and disadvantages of each.	1 <b>3.6%</b>	2 <b>0.0%</b>	3 <b>1.8%</b>	4 <b>61.8%</b>	5 <b>32.7%</b>
8. I have assessed the traits I possess that would contribute to my ability to effectively work in a team in a business or organization.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>0.0%</b>	3 <b>5.5%</b>	4 <b>70.9%</b>	5 <b>21.8%</b>
9. I know the importance of giving back to the community through 1 community/volunteer service.	2 <b>3.6%</b>	3 <b>1.8%</b>	4 <b>1.8%</b>	5 <b>45.5%</b>	<b>47.3%</b>
10. I have participated in community service activities.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>1.8%</b>	3 <b>1.8%</b>	4 <b>52.7%</b>	5 <b>41.8%</b>
11. I am much more aware of how diversity in the workplace enhances the cultural context and utilizes the abilities of people of different backgrounds and experiences.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>1.8%</b>	3 <b>3.6%</b>	4 <b>60.0%</b>	5 <b>32.7%</b>
12. I have received work experiences that should assist me in understanding the importance of work ethics, regular and timely attendance, work productivity, growth and development.	1 <b>5.5%</b>	2 <b>5.5%</b>	3 <b>9.1%</b>	4 <b>50.1%</b>	5 <b>29.1%</b>
13. I have more confidence in my ability to communicate and interact in a business social setting.	1 <b>1.8%</b>	2 <b>1.8%</b>	3 <b>9.1%</b>	4 <b>54.6%</b>	5 <b>32.7%</b>
14. I have learned basic dining etiquettes and feel more comfortable in a business dining setting.	1 <b>3.6%</b>	2 <b>1.8%</b>	3 <b>9.1%</b>	4 <b>54.6%</b>	5 <b>32.7%</b>
15. I believe my business savvy has improved as a result of the LAPD series.	1 <b>3.6%</b>	2 <b>7.3%</b>	3 <b>14.6%</b>	4 <b>50.1%</b>	5 <b>23.6%</b>

Table 2

	Mean	STD.	t-Value
As a result of the LAPD Program:			
1. My career direction is more focused and defined.	3.6360	1.0250	4.6
2. I have registered with the Career Center and have taken advantage of the interviews and other career preparation sessions offered by the Center.	3.7820	1.1000	5.3
3. I understand the importance of ethics and the role ethics play with a company or organization.	4.5636	0.7140	16.2
4. I have a sense of my own ethical behavior and values and how to best demonstrate them for the good of the organization.	4.4630	0.7450	14.4
5. The Executive Speaker Series provided key insights on skill sets I need to be successful.	4.1270	0.9440	8.9
6. I am more organized in my work and my personal life since learning about time management skills and employing these skills in my daily life.	4.0360	0.8810	8.7
7. I have learned about different leadership styles and the advantages and disadvantages of each.	4.2000	0.8030	11.1
8. I have assessed the traits I possess that would contribute to my ability to effectively work in a team in a business or organization.	4.1091	0.6575	12.5
9. I know the importance of giving back to the community through community/volunteer service.	4.3090	0.9000	10.8
10. I have participated in community service activities.	4.3090	0.7670	12.7
11. I am much more aware of how diversity in the workplace enhances the cultural context and utilizes the abilities of people of different backgrounds and experiences.	4.2000	0.7550	11.8
12. I have received work experiences that should assist me in understanding the importance of work ethics, regular and timely attendance, work productivity, growth and development.	3.9270	.0520	6.5
13. I have more confidence in my ability to communicate and interact in a business social setting.	4.1450	0.8030	10.6
14. I have learned basic dining etiquettes and feel more comfortable in a business dining setting.	3.8910	1.0120	6.5
15. I believe my business savvy has improved as a result of the LAPD series.	3.8360	0.9960	6.2

### Analysis of Results

As indicated in Table 2, the mean scores ranged from 3.636 to 4.56, and in Table 1, the percentage of agreement ranged from 65.5% to 96.3%. This suggests that students perceived the LAPD had a significant impact on their ability to focus on career development; manage their time more effectively; understand different leadership styles; become more aware of ethical and diversity issues in the workplace; engage in teambuilding, service learning and improve their dining and business etiquette. More importantly, as a result of the LAPD curriculum students believe they have more confidence in themselves, which is projected when they interview for internships and jobs.

In addition, 87% of students believe the Executive Speaker Series is beneficial in providing key insights on their professional development. The level of speakers and the active involvement of students in the program create a professional environment on a regular and consistent basis which leads to a comfort level of students with key figures in business, government and in the community. Thus, students are much more effective in employment interviews. Invited guests are also extremely impressed with students' professional appearance and behavior and communicate these opinions on a weekly basis, which provides another level of confidence for students. It is most impressive to see students enter as freshman with little or no exposure to corporate America and grow into very sophisticated graduates ready to take on the business world.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAM**

A successful leadership and professional development program requires a commitment and sufficient infrastructure to support its full implementation. There are various structures that schools may use to implement such a program. For example, instead of required courses, students may be required to attend seminars. The cost and infrastructure will therefore, vary depending on which approach is used. The model presented in this paper involves several components and a series of activities leading up to and taking place during implementation of the program, which are described below.

### ***Personnel and Logistics***

First, a Program Coordinator is assigned to coordinate the program, including the Executive Speaker Series (ESS). Depending on the level of implementation, this may be a full-time faculty with 50% teaching responsibility.

The Program Coordinator's responsibilities include:

- Identifying and contracting with potential speakers; following up with speakers in writing, with sufficient program details; soliciting a bio and picture from speakers for posting on display board and program; determining and arranging for audio/visual or other presentation supports; coordinating the luncheon with speaker; and preparing a press release on the overall series for the semester and on each individual speaker as the series progresses during the semester.
- Designating students to greet speakers upon arrival and escort to places on the itinerary. (See Exhibit for sample itinerary)
- Designating and preparing students to discuss relevant topics and ask questions during the "Students of the Roundtable Discussions" and assigning students to participate on the at the assembly program.
- Coordinating, reviewing and assessing the curriculum content on a periodic basis.

### **Faculty**

Secondly, LAPD faculty must be assigned to teach the courses. Faculty development activities such as workshops, seminars, etc. are needed on an on-going basis to develop the pre-requisite competencies to teach 'soft skills.' The LAPD faculty should meet regularly to:

- Discuss issues in implementing the curriculum;
- Share syllabi, identify problems of overlap and prioritizing when and how core competencies are taught; determine course texts and other resources to support instruction; and, assess the assurance of learning goals of the program.

### **Students**

All students enrolled in the LAPD courses are required to attend the Executive Speaker Series. Selected students enrolled in the LAPD courses serve as an escort for the speaker, participate in the morning roundtable discussions and serve as platform participants for the noon program. Students are encouraged to ask business or industry related questions of the speaker during the program. Thus, over a three-year period, students are listening, questioning, and interacting with key business executives. This exposure allows them to become comfortable in

situations with high level officials, as well as in job interviews. Dress and appearance are important components of the ESS Program, therefore, students are taught what professional business attire is and are required to be professionally dressed in dark suits to attend the series.

### Curriculum

Once the initial curriculum has been developed, it must be updated continuously to assure that the course content reflect the latest research findings on the 'soft skills' perceived by the business community as a priority in the work place. Continuous assessment of student learning is essential to assure that objectives of the program are achieved.

### SUMMARY

Preparing students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is a concern at many colleges and universities today. While the curriculum at most schools focus on the technical skills, with little or no emphasis on the soft skills, this paper presents a model that has been successful at one school in transitioning students from the classroom to the workplace. Some preliminary results were presented as evidence of its impact, however, the program will continue to be assessed more extensively and on a periodic basis.

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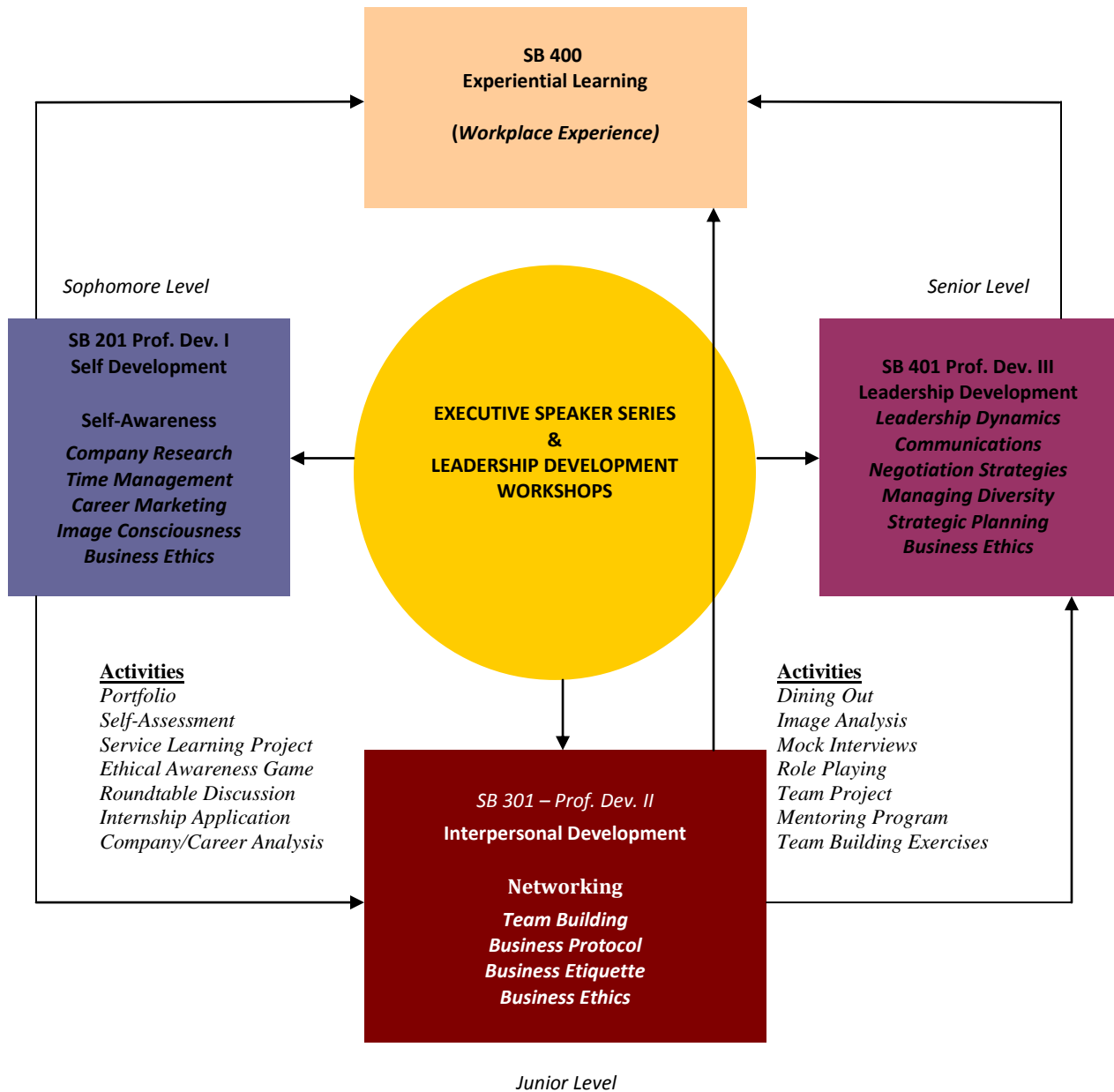
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**EXHIBIT 1  
The LAPD Model**





**EXHIBIT 2**  
**Projects And Activities**

**Self-Assessment**

Students use some aspects of the Myers-Brigg Indicator to help them become more effective and aware of their behavior and personality types.

**Web Portfolio**

Each student develops a web-based portfolio. The portfolios will include assignments and exercises assigned for the respective courses. Since all School of Business majors must complete the three-course sequence, students will add to their portfolios as they progress through the LAPD courses.

**Service Learning Project**

Each student is required to participate in a service learning project by providing volunteer services to a community or service organization. Each class will adopt a project to work on each semester. Verification from the volunteer entity and a student report on their activities will be submitted for credit.

**Mentoring Program**

The aim of the mentoring program is to encourage valuable relationships between younger and older School of Business students, and between senior School of Business students and members of the business community. All students enrolled in the professional development courses will participate in the mentoring program. During the spring semester, each student enrolled in the Introduction to Business course will be assigned a mentor enrolled in the sophomore and junior LAPD courses. Members of the business community will mentor students enrolled in the senior level LAPD course. Reports on these mentoring relationships will serve as a basis for student evaluation in the mentoring portion of each course's requirements.

**Image Analysis**

A Leadership Development Workshop on *Image Analysis* provides students with instruction on how to project a good first impression. Proper attire, body language, eye contact, and a firm handshake are among the topics discussed.

**Dining Etiquette**

Students participate in a dining out experience and receive instruction on table manners and how to conduct themselves in a social setting.

**Mock Interviews**

Students must participate in mock interviews in the Career Development Center.

**Company Analysis**

Students must research 3 companies and complete an internship application with at least one of the companies, prepare a resume and a thank you letter.

**Ethical Awareness Game/Exercises**

Students engage in games and exercises to enhance their awareness of ethical dilemmas and how to resolve them.

**Roundtable Discussion**

Each Wednesday a group of students interact with the executive speaker for the day in a Roundtable Discussion.

**ESS Program Participation**

Each Wednesday students are selected to participate in various roles in the program for the Executive Speaker Series (example, preside over the program, introduce speakers, acknowledgements and announcements, usher, escort guest, etc.)

**Experiential Learning**

Students must complete at least 45-hours of experiential learning in their major area.

**EXHIBIT 3**  
**Courses and Competencies**

Each course in the LAPD curriculum is designed to ensure that students acquire or develop specific competencies. The competencies for the four one-hour SB series appear below.

**SB 201 – Professional Development I – Self-Development**

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Description</b>
Self-Awareness	Ability to identify personal interests, values, strengths and weaknesses, and preferences
Company and Career Research	Ability to locate and utilize information sources to conduct company and career research
Time Management	Ability to prioritize assignments and manage time effectively
Career Marketing	Ability to market one's skill sets and abilities through effective resume writing and interviewing skills
Image Consciousness	Ability to project a professional image through attire and demeanor
Business Ethics	Ability to build trust and internalize honesty and integrity

**SB 301 – Professional Development II – Interpersonal Development**

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Description</b>
Networking	Ability to build lucrative internal and external relationships
Team Building	Ability to understand group dynamics and work effectively within a team
Business Protocol	Ability to understand formal and informal organizational structures and cultures
Business Etiquette	Ability to apply accepted business etiquette in dining and other situations
Business Ethics	Ability to build trust and internalize honesty and integrity

**SB 401 – Professional Development III – Leadership Development**

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Description</b>
Leadership Dynamics, Responsibilities and Development	Ability to define leadership, recognize leadership styles/personalities and internalize leadership characteristics and roles
Leadership Communications	Ability to apply effective communication and persuasion strategies
Negotiation Strategies	Ability to apply successful negotiation strategies
Managing Diversity	Ability to effectively embrace and utilize differences for common gain
Management and Strategic Planning	Ability to apply management and planning strategies
Business Ethics	Ability to build trust; to internalize honesty and integrity

**SB 400 – Experiential Learning**

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Description</b>
Workplace Experience	Ability to perform as a professional in a work place setting