Fostering Culture Change In An Undergraduate Business Program: "Nudging" Students Towards Greater Involvement In Extra-Curricular Activities

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ABSTRACT

A report on a successfully implemented program to increase student participation in extra-curricular activities in an undergraduate business program with a high percentage of first-generation college students. A market-research study offered insight as to why students were not participating before the program was launched. Greater participation in extra-curricular activities was used as a means to provide valuable career preparation and to develop professional habits. Participation was encouraged with very small rewards tied to existing courses, consistent with the "nudging" mechanism of behavioral economics.

Keywords: Extra-Curricular Activities; Undergraduate Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

*P*icture this common scenario in an undergraduate business program: faculty invite outstanding speakers, staff plan career-preparation workshops, campus clubs attempt to recruit members---and then few if any students show up. The lack of student interest feeds into a negative cycle, with a decreasing number of activities occurring.

Facing this depressing predicament year after year at our Midwestern public university, our business faculty and administrators decided to take a fresh approach. We wanted to strengthen our business school's student culture in two key areas:

- Professionalism: our students should be developing habits and appreciation of lifelong learning and community involvement.
- Career preparation: our students should be building skills for job searches, networking and interviewing.

Our focus on these areas fits in with national trends. As reported by Weber (2012), colleges across the U.S. are placing greater emphasis on job preparation and career development.

We built our strategy for improving our business school's student culture around increasing student involvement in extra-curricular activities---the broad array of learning opportunities existing beyond the formal class structure. (We excluded only purely political or social activities from consideration.) We aimed to increase student participation in activities including:

- Business school programs, such as clubs and speakers
- Campus-wide offerings, such as career-preparation workshops
- Business-community happenings, such as conferences and meetings.

To achieve this culture change, we dramatically increased the number and variety of activities while simultaneously linking the activities to required (core) courses. We "nudged" students towards greater involvement in extra-curricular activities by providing small rewards and making it easier for them to participate. This simple yet innovative program offers numerous advantages:

- It is more effective than what could be described as the "old-style" or "hands-off" approach. It is no longer realistic to expect students to intuitively grasp the value of extra-curricular activities.
- It is more professional than an "ad-hoc" approach of offering extra credit for occasional activities. Having ongoing student participation in a regular series of activities sends the message that getting involved is a fundamental part of being a professional.
- It allows students to customize their learning experiences by selecting the activities of most interest to them.
- It is more likely to lead to our ultimate objective of self-motivated participation by students, because participation in extra-curricular activities is not tied to a substantial penalty or reward.
- It is far less expensive than assigning one or more faculty to teach many sections of a required "professional development" seminar.
- It is less burdensome on faculty and students than requiring written course assignments to verify attendance at extra-curricular activities.

In this paper, we first review the market-research study done in preparation for the development and launch of our extra-curricular activities program for undergraduate business students. We then describe the program's philosophy and key elements. Next, we present the results of operating the program for two academic years. We follow with advice for implementing an extra-curricular activities program and then include some issues for further development and research.

MARKET RESEARCH

The project began in Summer 2010, when an undergraduate market-research class at our institution took on the challenge of researching how to design the ideal extra-curricular activities program for students such as themselves. The market research unearthed valuable insights that helped to guide our subsequent design and launch of an extra-curricular activities program. Furthermore, as Walsh (2009) commented in regard to increasing student engagement through extra-curricular activities, students are more likely to participate in activities they have helped to plan.

The class was divided into four teams; each team worked on different angles of the problem and reported back regularly to the full class. The teams began with open-ended, exploratory research questions. They interviewed relevant "experts," such as faculty, staff and select students, and scanned the environment to see what other schools were offering with respect to extra-curricular activities.

Based on their exploratory research, the market-research students began to develop the "personas" of archetypal students. Personas are used as touchstones throughout the product-design process to link product features to customer needs. Drawing upon earlier market research, personas typically include a name or nickname, a photo or sketch, demographic details, behaviors, goals and needs (Don and Petrick, 2003). The personas can be fleshed out via brainstorming to produce "empathy maps"---detailed descriptions of the customers' thoughts, feelings and needs (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). With personas, designers can see which features will satisfy the needs of multiple types of customers. Designers can also work to include features that will meet the needs of particular personas and can avoid adding features that are not valued by any type of customer. Keeping the personas in mind during product development should improve the quality of the final product as designers constantly ask questions linking products to personas, such as, "What would Sally, the soccer mom, or Jane, the empty-nester, think of this?"

The market-research students worked up the following personas of undergraduate business students, complete with tongue-in-cheek cultural references:

- Newbies, aka "The Pups": freshmen.
- Slackers, aka "Ferris Bueller": those less dedicated to academic success. Their other, more pressing priorities might be socializing, work or family.
- Over-Achievers, aka "Carlton Banks": hard working, with lofty academic goals.

Table 1 contrasts the personas in terms of needs. While there are many needs in common, such as the need to save time, other needs are linked to particular personas.

Table 1: Student Personas

Need	Newbies aka "the Pups"*	Slackers aka "Ferris Bueller"**	Over-Achievers aka "Carlton Banks"***
To socialize	Strong	Strong	Minimal
To network	Minimal	None	Strong
To be entertained	Strong	Strong	Minimal
To be successful now (school)	Moderate	Minimal	Strong
To be successful in future (career)	None	None	Strong
To be provided structure/guidance	Strong	None	Strong
To acquire knowledge	Minimal	None	Moderate
To learn shortcuts	Strong	Strong	Strong
To earn cash now	Strong	Strong	Strong
To save time now	Strong	Strong	Strong
To be recognized for efforts	None	None	Strong

*Freshmen.
** From the 1986 movie, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."
*** From the 1990-96 television series, "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air."

Next, the market-research students held focus groups to delve deeper into the perspectives of students fitting each persona. Relatively homogenous focus groups are preferred so that participants can build on each other's comments (Malhotra, 2012). Therefore, focus-group participants were recruited based on the market-research students' informal assessments of persona type. Of course, focus-group participants were not informed as to how they were being categorized.

The student moderators of the focus groups gathered feedback on a fundamental question: Why don't students more frequently take advantage of opportunities for learning outside the classroom? The responses from focus-group participants were complex. At one level, there were responses that were linked to the personas:

- Newbies and Slackers were apt to say that they didn't know about available opportunities; Over-Achievers were less likely to be unaware of opportunities.
- Over-Achievers were more likely than others to say they were under time pressure to complete assignments for current courses.
- Slackers were more likely than others to say they needed to spend their time earning money.

At a deeper level, across all personas, many focus-group participants alluded to not seeing clear, specific benefits of extra-curricular activities. Our students are typically not looking far enough ahead in their career trajectories to see the importance of combining career knowledge, skills and networks now for benefit at some uncertain future date.

This lack of connection for students between early preparation and later rewards is likely driven in part by our institution's high-percentage (currently 46% of the incoming class) of "first-generation" college students. Defined as students without any college-graduate parents, first-generation college students frequently lack the "cultural capital" that can be crucial for success in college (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian and Slavin Miller, 2007). Collier and Morgan present qualitative research on the importance of students' "preexisting knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings" (2008, p. 429), which first-generation students have difficulty acquiring. Mehta, Newbold and O'Rourke (2011) present survey data showing first-generation students to be less involved in campus activities.

The personas framework developed by our market-research students also yielded more specific insights that were utilized in the design and implementation of the program. These are highlighted in the sections below.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In their influential book, *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) describe experimental subjects who, like our undergraduate business students, make less-than-optimal decisions---"decisions they would not have made if they had paid full attention and possessed complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and complete self-control." Thaler and Sunstein explain how, through the careful design of choice mechanisms, authorities can help individuals make decisions "that will make choosers better off, *as judged by themselves*" (italics in original, p. 5). To apply this to our situation of educating undergraduate business majors: if we can somehow get students to participate in extra-curricular activities, the students should ultimately see that they have benefited from their participation.

Thaler and Sunstein argue for the use of carefully selected "nudges": incentives that will guide behavior in a particular direction yet are "easy and cheap to avoid…not mandates" (p. 6). With the work of Thaler, Sunstein and others, the field of behavioral economics has shown how tweaking the presentation of available choices can lead to better decisions in situations as varied as purchasing health insurance or saving for retirement (Dorning 2010). If you make it easier to make a better choice, people will respond accordingly. Thaler and Sunstein discourage the use of mandates (top-down decisions by authorities) in order to preserve individual freedom of choice.

Our business school has taken the approach of "nudging" our students towards greater participation in extra-curricular activities. We offer a trivial amount of credit (typically just a few points) in existing courses for attendance. The points associated with attendance make it easier for the students to remember to plan and schedule their participation, but are easily foregone without serious ramifications. We did not take the relatively simpler path of mandating participation; i.e., by adding one or more required professional-development courses. Delivering similar content via required courses would eliminate the opportunity for students to customize their learning and to figure out for themselves the value of attending activities---not to mention the extra cost for the school.

With the "nudge" philosophy as its foundation, the key elements of our business school's extra-curricular activities program are as follows:

- All faculty teaching required (core) courses include nearly identical statements on their syllabi describing the attendance requirements at extra-curricular activities for their courses. The only variation in the statements is with regards to how many points are assigned to attendance. (See Appendix 1.)
- All students know the minimum number of activities they need to attend during the semester, based on the courses in which they are enrolled. Each activity attended counts towards a single course.
- One faculty member is assigned to work approximately 10 hours per week on the extra-curricular activities program and is provided with the assistance of two student interns each also working ten hours per week.
- The faculty member responsible for the school's activities program prepares and distributes a weekly list of activities, all of which are potential credit-earning opportunities.
- When attending an activity, students sign-in by swiping their student-identification cards through a scanner.
- Periodically throughout the semester, students and faculty members receive simple reports indicating which students have attended activities for credit in their various courses.
- Faculty members post credit for attendance at extra-curricular activities in their course grade-books.

RESULTS

Quickly following the market-research project, our extra-curricular activities program was rolled out to approximately 700 undergraduate students in our business school in Fall 2010. With two full academic years of results and feedback, we can report very positive results; in fact, the program has been so well received that preliminary discussions have begun regarding replicating the program across other departments on campus.

First, there has been a dramatic increase in the extra-curricular activities available to the students. Including programs offered by other campus departments and off-campus groups, we have averaged about 70 activities per semester. To put this in context, there were only about a dozen career-preparation workshops and one or two speakers during a typical semester before the launch of our extra-curricular activities program. Now, there is a sense of energy and excitement among faculty and students about the constant stream of activities.

Program topics have varied widely, from practice interviews to local entrepreneurial successes, and from resume writing to CEO perspectives. Program quality was aided via insights from the market-research project, which showed that our students would be especially interested in hearing from fellow students and recent graduates.

Second, we have had terrific attendance at the scheduled events. Our total headcount for our first full-year, 2010-11, was 2626 students at 137 events. In our second year, 2011-12, we increased attendance to 3101 students at 147 events. Attendance at career-preparation workshops, in particular, has skyrocketed since the implementation of our extra-curricular activities program. Before the program, a typical turnout was six-ten students at a workshop; now, it is not unusual to have 60 students in attendance.

For the second year of the program, we have detailed attendance data. (Similar data are not available for the first year of the program.) Table 2 shows that the percentage of students participating at least partially (that is, attending at least one event) in the extra-curricular activities program rose from Fall to Spring semester, and averaged 88.8% overall. We are also able to compare students' required attendance at activities to their actual attendance (See Table 3.) The data show, first, that with 41.5% of the students not attending the full number of their required activities, the penalty of missing a few points in a required course is not perceived by our students as a substantial penalty. This is confirmation that we are merely "nudging," not forcing, our students towards greater involvement in extra-curricular activities. Second, we see that 13.6% of our students attended more than their required number of activities; in other words, they attended activities due to self-motivation rather than to earn points.

Table 2: Student Participation, Academic Year 2011-12

	Non-Participants	Participants	Total
Fall	77 (13.8%)	479 (86.2%)	556
Spring*	66 (9.2%)	654 (90.8%)	720
Total	143 (11.2%)	1133 (88.8%)	1276

*Spring semester participation jumped due to an increase in the required (core) courses in the activities program.

Table 3: Student Participation by Participation Level, Academic Year 2011-12

	Low Participation*	Average Participation**	High Participation***	Total
Fall	268 (48.2%)	206 (37.5%)	82 (14.7%)	556
Spring	261 (36.3%)	367 (51.0%)	92 (12.8%)	720
Total	529 (41.5%)	573 (44.9%)	174 (13.6%)	1276

*Attended fewer than their required number of activities.
**Attended just their required number of activities.
***Attended more than their required number of activities.

Third, there has been strong synergy between our business school's extra-curricular activities program and other business-school goals. For instance, we have prioritized increasing the number of graduates who study abroad and/or complete an internship before graduation. We have added extra-curricular activities highlighting these opportunities and have seen subsequent increases in participation.

Fourth, feedback from students on our extra-curricular activities program has been positive. Comments in business-school focus groups and on surveys have included:

- "One of the best things about our school of business."
- "That's just something we do as business students---we attend events."
- "Inspirational."
- "Very helpful in the job search."

Satisfaction surveys were distributed to convenience samples (classes meeting at scattered times). Students were asked "On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not satisfied and 5 being very satisfied), how would you rate the overall benefit of the [school name] events that you attended this year?" At the end of the first year of the program, the overall satisfaction score was 3.44 out of 5, with 439 respondents. At the end of the second year of the program, the overall satisfaction score was 3.04, with 322 respondents. While the scores remain respectable, the decline in the second year is a concern. Possible explanations include the program transitioning from new and novel to standard and routine; a decrease in student flexibility in the second year (we now decide which courses are credited rather than allowing students to choose); technical problems with our sign-in process that have now been resolved; and the introduction of more sophomores into the program.

Finally, we accomplished the above results without "breaking the bank." All of our speakers are volunteers. We tap into local business expertise, not "big names." We rarely splurge for refreshments. We pay for the effort of just ten hours per week from one faculty member and two student interns. Despite these constraints, we managed to create a successful, thriving program of extra-curricular activities.

IMPLEMENTATION ADVICE

Launching a brand-new extra-curricular activities program, with limited time and staff, can seem daunting--but based on our research and experience, here are our suggestions for maximizing success.

Present as a business-school initiative

When students hear the same message about the importance of attending extra-curricular activities from all faculty, they know that their business school is fully committed to the endeavor. Broad faculty support and buy-in are crucial for building increased student engagement into the business school's culture.

Keep costs to a minimum

Buy a simple card-reader (about $50) and attach to a laptop to record student attendance at events. Attendance data can be uploaded into course-management software such as Blackboard or a similar product; nearly all schools have such a tool readily available.

Clearly define program parameters

We require students to fulfill half of their attendance requirements by the mid-point of the semester. This requirement not only forces students to overcome procrastination but also spreads out some of the "demand" for activities. (We did face some initial challenges regarding booking sufficiently large rooms for the end-of-semester crush.) To allocate event-attendance credits in a systematic, neutral fashion, we assign credits to students' courses in alpha-numeric order. (This becomes important to students only if they fail to attend their required number of activities.)

Build strategic partnerships, both on- and off-campus

Our biggest worry when launching our extra-curricular activities program was whether we would be able to provide students with sufficient opportunities to earn their attendance credits. With just one part-time faculty member and two student interns responsible for both planning and administration of the program, we could offer just one to two net new activities per week. By promoting others' existing activities, we expanded our offerings to up to 10 activities per week.

Plan programs for students' varied interests and needs

To reach the "Newbies," we have senior students on panels entitled, "What We Wish We Had Known." To give some "Over-Achievers" extra challenge and recognition, we turn over panel-moderator duties to student hosts. To accommodate the procrastination of "Slackers," we plan extra activities in large rooms when an attendance deadline is near.

Don't overburden students

We require attendance only, not follow-up written reports. We expect students to attend just two activities per required (core) course over a semester. We have attendance requirements for extra-curricular activities in only required (core) courses rather than all business school courses so as to keep the total amount of out-of-class time reasonable. With this system, 96% of our students in 2012 were required to attend six or fewer activities over a semester.

Project enthusiasm

The extra-curricular activities are wonderful learning opportunities---with no tests or homework---so keep a positive tone. Design announcements with a catchy logo and easy-to-read format. Occasionally add a lighter event to the schedule, such as a "Business at the Movies" night. Surprise students with a raffle for a door prize. Give bonus credit to students who show extra initiative by attending off-campus activities. Don't add stress by scheduling activities during the start or end of a semester.

Communicate, communicate, communicate!

Our primary means of communicating the schedule of upcoming extra-curricular activities is a weekly online newsletter; however, a frustrating (yet useful) comment from our market-research focus groups was, "We don't read email." We therefore also publish the newsletter on the school's web site and post printed copies on bulletin boards. (We haven't done much with social media sites because our students aren't asking to have school information there.) In addition to our newsletter, we prepare a "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions) document with details about the workings of the extra-curricular activities program; this document is also emailed, published on the school's web site and posted on bulletin boards. A pleasantly surprising comment from our market-research focus groups was that professors' recommendations about upcoming activities are highly influential, so we encourage faculty recommendations as appropriate.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS AND RESEARCH

The success of our extra-curricular activities program has prompted energetic discussion amongst our business school students, faculty and staff regarding future developments of and research on the program.

In the years ahead, we see numerous ways in which technology could be leveraged to improve our program:

- Custom software could be developed to allow immediate online attendance updates.
- A mobile application could be designed to coordinate with students' smart-phones, providing event information and reminders.
- Online conferencing tools could allow us to host more speakers from our far-flung alumni network.

Beyond technological aspects, we see two areas of opportunity for substantial increases in student participation in our extra-curricular activities program:

- A reduction in the number of students not attending their minimum number of required activities per semester. We will continue to expand the variety and timing of offerings with the hope of meeting more students' interests and needs.
- Greater engagement of the "newbies" who are typically not yet enrolled in required (core) business courses. As business school majors, these students receive regular communication about upcoming activities but are not required to attend any such activities. Some newbies have reported that they assumed they had received event notices by accident and were not truly welcome at activities; we plan to do more to make them feel welcome.

Further research would be helpful on a number of related questions:

- How prevalent are mandatory professional-development courses in undergraduate business curricula? Alternatively, how many schools rely, as our program does, on only extra-curricular programs to deliver critical career-preparation information?
- How would students' commitment to life-long learning vary between schools with mandatory professional-development courses versus those with similar content delivered through extra-curricular activities?
- Is there a correlation between the different patterns of attendance (low, average and high) and the personas identified in our market-research study?

CONCLUSION

We want our students to build both the skills necessary for career transition and the habits of life-long learning that are keys to professional success. In many business schools, an important way for students to do so is via extra-curricular activities. A robust extra-curricular activities program is not only less expensive than mandatory coursework, it allows for greater student flexibility and responsibility.

We hope that others will build on our research and experience to improve the culture within undergraduate business programs so that student participation in extra-curricular activities is an integral part of the student culture-- "just something we do."

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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APPENDIX 1: Sample Wording for Course Syllabi

The [department/school name] has a series of speakers, discussions, workshops and field trips called **[program name]**. It is important to take advantage of these learning opportunities outside the classroom. The activities are designed to help you make the most out of your time as a student and to prepare for a successful career.

- For this course, you must attend two official activities. One activity must be before the mid-semester cut-off of [date 1]; a second activity must be before the end-of-semester cut-off of [date 2]. If you attend extra activities before [date 1], the credit will carry over into the second half of the semester. Attendance at each activity will count for [x] points towards your final grade.
- Watch your e-mail, the department web site and the [department online learning platform] page for announcements of upcoming activities.
- When you attend an activity, it is your responsibility to sign in with your student ID card. Attendance will be updated in a [department online learning platform] page on a weekly basis.
- If you have multiple courses with activities requirements, it is your responsibility to make sure you have attended enough activities for each course. If you have not attended enough activities to cover all of your courses, your attendance will be allocated to your courses in alpha-numeric order.
- After [date 1] and [date 2], I will receive a report confirming your attendance. You do not need to do anything else.

NOTES