

**THE EVOLUTION AND EVALUATION OF A REQUIRED, SENIOR-
LEVEL COURSE IN EXPERIENTIAL BUSINESS APPLICATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

At the ABSEL Third Annual Conference, one of the co-authors presented a paper that discusses the implementation of a required, senior-level course in experiential business application [3]. At that point in time, this course had been offered through only two academic years. Another year of further development provided a longer period of time for evaluation and reflection on the evolution of General Business 495, "Experiential Business Applications."

This paper presents the background, operations, problems, evolution, and evaluation of GB 495. In addition, a discussion of future changes and adaptations is presented.

BACKGROUND OF GB 495

The College of Business Administration (CBA) at Texas A&I University at Corpus Christi is extremely interested in the success of its graduates. The CBA wants its graduates to be able to obtain entry-level jobs; and once a job is obtained, the CBA wants its graduates to succeed on this job as a first step toward a successful career. The educational system for the CBA is designed to monitor the system so that graduates are well prepared for their careers (see Exhibit 1).

The educational process of the CBA is further described in Exhibit 2. Each business course occupies space in the three-dimensional cube shown in Exhibit 2. The B.B.A. candidate follows a path of courses that leads from the bottom, left-hand corner to the upper, right-hand corner. Note that GB 495 is in the upper right-corner. This course, GB 495, "Experiential Business Applications," is a course designed to allow the student to adapt and apply previously obtained skills directly to the environment and, therefore, demonstrate the types of skills associated with successful careers. As such, this course represents a first tentative step of the CBA toward a competency-based curriculum.

GB 495 was first offered in the CBA at Texas A&I University at Corpus Christi in the Summer, 1974. In the Fall, 1974, this course was made an integral part of the core requirements for the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree. The junior-level business core supplements the business foundation requirements and generally precedes the coursework taken for

EXHIBIT 1

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FOR:
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (CBA)
TEXAS A & I—CORPUS CHRISTI

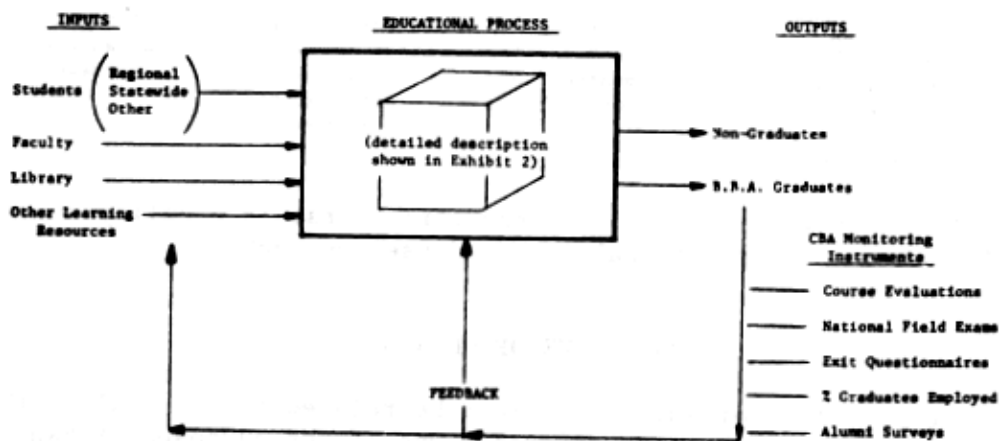
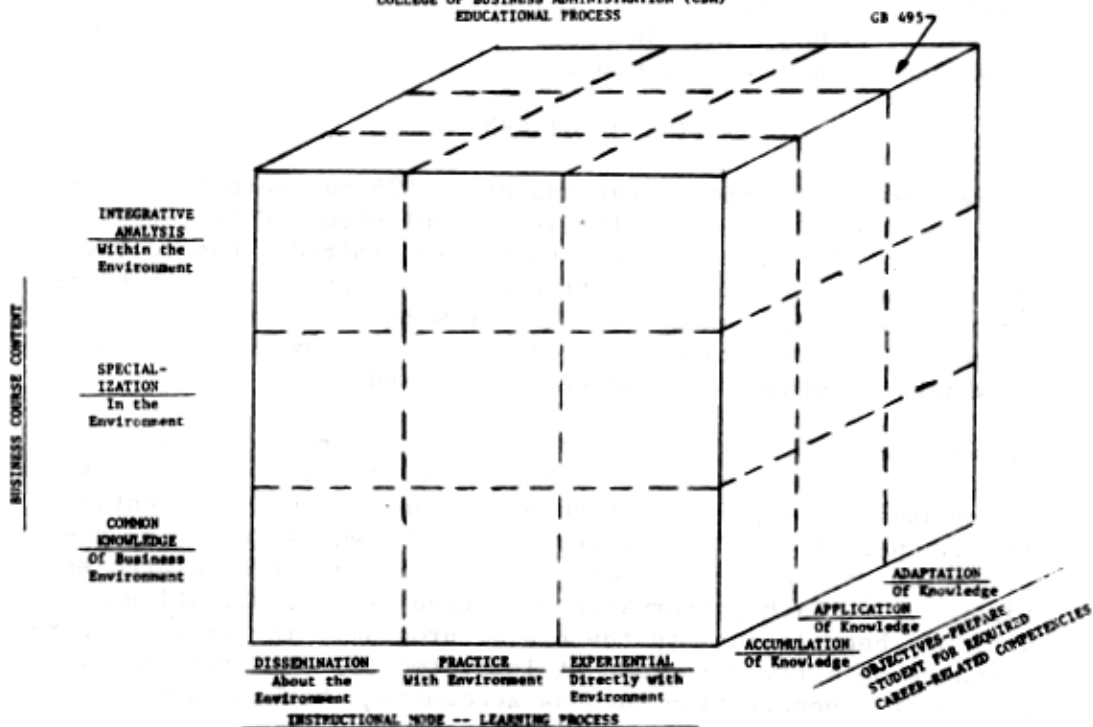


EXHIBIT 2

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (CBA)
EDUCATIONAL PROCESS



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the various concentrations such as accounting, management, marketing, etc. The senior-level business core represents the capstone of the B.B.A. curriculum. Below is a simplified form of the business component of the B.B.A. degree at this university:

Business Core Business			
<u>Business Foundation</u>	<u>Junior-Level</u>	<u>Senior-Level</u>	<u>Concentration</u>
Accounting	Basic Management	Business Policy	21-24 hours of advanced coursework.
Business Math	Basic Marketing	Experiential	
Business Law	Communications	Business	
Computer	Corporate Finance	Applications	
Programming		(GB 495)	
Economics			
Statistics			

The other senior-level business core course is a policy course which uses a traditional lecture/case approach.

OBJECTIVE OF GB 495

The objective of any course must be related to the goal of the college in which it is offered. One of the purposes of Exhibit 2 is to illustrate the interrelationships of all courses offered by the CBA at this university. The goal of the CBA is to “prepare graduates for non-research-oriented careers.” The objective of GB 495 is for the student to demonstrate successfully the application of the skills, techniques, and analytical procedures introduced in classroom experiences to real or simulated work environments.

OPERATION OF GB 495

A few comments on the operations of GB 495 may help to illustrate how the course objective is accomplished. First, the eligibility for this course is strictly limited. Due to the specialized nature and objective of this course, enrollment is limited to B.B.A. candidates who are within twenty-four (24) semester hours of graduation. The 24 hours may include courses in which the student is currently enrolled.

Second, the course requirements are quite simple. Each student selects and completes sufficient performance objectives to accumulate 30 points. Each performance objective identifies a specific action and product which demonstrates the application of a classroom concept to an actual or simulated environment.¹ Each performance objective is an application of what has been learned in the B.B.A. program. The selected performance objectives include at least two (2) different major fields of concentration such as accounting, banking and finance, etc.

¹ For a more complete description of “performance objectives” in this course, see [3].

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The grading policy of this course differs from other CBA courses. The course objective is for the student to demonstrate successfully the application of procedures introduced in the B.B.A. program to actual or simulated work environments. In line with this objective, a binary grading system is used. Every student must accumulate at least thirty (30) points. After the student completes sufficient performance objectives needed to accumulate these points, he or she receives a grade of "Credit" for the course. Students who do not accumulate 30 points within the allotted time period receive the grade of "No Credit."

The mechanism used for selecting, submitting, and approving performance objectives is the "student contract." Each student negotiates a contract for each performance objective selected. The student contracts have triplicate copies--one to submit to the Program Coordinator for approval of the task selected, one for submission with the final materials submitted for the performance objective, and one for the records of the student. A copy of a student contract is shown in Exhibit 3.

PROBLEMS WITH GB 495

Two main problems arose with the GB 495 through the first two years of operation. First, from the faculty standpoint, too many performance objectives were being accomplished in simulated environments. Obviously, not all students have access to ongoing organizations; however, the opportunity to utilize simulated environments encouraged students to use textbook examples and previously-used cases. This excessive use of simulated environments detracted from the CBA objective of preparing the students for work-related careers.

The second problem area related to the attitude of the students toward this required senior-level course. Required coursework is seldom popular, but the unique and evolving nature of GB 495 raised even more questions in the minds of the students. There were several reasons for this relative unpopularity. First, the students did not understand the rationale for the required course. Second, the evolving and initially unsettled nature of the requirements proved bothersome to the students; since the course was quite different from a standard, lecture-oriented course, in-course adjustments were ill-perceived by the students. Last, the students realized that the work required by this course was often greater than that required by a "traditional" course. Hence, the lack of a formal grade disheartened some students. In today's grade-oriented environment, students realized that the same effort that would yield an above-average grade in a traditional course, yields only a "Credit" in GB 495.

EXHIBIT 3

Class Section _____

**STUDENT CONTRACT
GENERAL BUSINESS 495**

1. State Area, Number, and Title of Performance Objective:

AREA (Circle One)

ACC

BE

ECO

NAN

NKT

2. Actual or Simulated Environment (Circle One) and describe briefly:

3. List of Important Materials to be used for this Performance Objective:

4. Points Sought for this Performance Objective:

Special Instructions:

Due Date Selected by Student for this Performance Objective: _____

Student's signature _____

Instructor's signature _____

GB 495 has changed over the last three academic years as a result of the previously mentioned problems. To increase the interaction of the students with actual environments, two changes have been initiated. First, optional tours of local business and governmental facilities are scheduled throughout the semester for interested students to attend; any student with little or no experience in actual organizations can observe on-going operations.

Observing is useful but can never take the place of doing. Therefore, special projects are made available for students with local businesses, regional agencies, and campus organizations. In previous semesters, these special projects have included electronic banking surveys and surveys of area commercial office space. The number and variety of special projects has greatly increased. For example, for the Fall, 1976, Semester, special projects include a feasibility study and a land-use index for the local industrial development commission, development of an inventory control system for the campus food service, and a study of projected employment needs of area employers for the university placement office among others. The student enthusiasm for these hands-on projects is quite high.

The second problem area mentioned previously deals with the perceptions of the students about GB 495. A much more systematic and organized approach began in the Summer, 1976. Indicative of this change is the booklet prepared for the students entitled "Experiential Business Application--Course Objectives, Operations, and Materials."² This booklet contains the materials discussed in the section entitled "Background of GB 495" as well as materials that explicitly answer all operational questions that students have raised to date. The students have responded very positively to the background information--particularly when it becomes apparent that GB 495 is recognized as a special opportunity. Probably the most encouraging statement for the students is that they must be near an important career milestone since this course is only available to those near graduation. The explicit description of the operational mechanisms has greatly reduced the uncertainty in the minds of the students; of course, an explicit statement at the onset of the semester prevents mid-term changes of the type the students encountered initially. This booklet is also a useful selling instrument for the CBA Faculty who might well prefer that the students were enrolled in their own respective advanced courses rather than the required GB 495.

² This publication is available from the authors upon written request [1].

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EVALUATION OF GB 495

One aspect of the operation of GB 495 remains quite unpopular with the students--the lack of a standard A/B/C/D/F, grading system. This is particularly the case with the less-gifted students as well as those full-time employed students who have less time to devote to educational activities. The following table illustrates what happened to the proportion of students successfully completing this course before and after the change to a "Credit/No Credit" grading system:

<u>Grading System</u>	<u>Number of Class Sections</u>	<u>Number of Students Completing Out of Number Officially Enrolled</u>	<u>Proportion of Students Completing During Allotted Time Period</u>
A/B/C/D/F	6	47/55	85%
Credit/No Credit	4	47/65	74%

Apparently, the switch to a "Credit/No Credit" grading system reduces the proportion of students successfully completing the course. Given the nature of the course objective, there is no current consideration of returning the grading system to the original traditional format.

The image problem of GB 495 is discussed above. No efforts have been made to make the course more "popular". However, substantial efforts have been put forth to make the course more useful to degree candidates, and to present to the students the role of this course in their overall B.B.A. curriculum. The CBA uses an exit interview for all graduating seniors as one of several feedback mechanisms for the undergraduate program (see Exhibit 1). The graduating seniors are asked to list three courses that are of "Greatest Benefit" as well as three of "Least Benefit." The following table presents the results of the last three exit questionnaires:

<u>Semester of Graduation</u>	<u>Proportion of Students Referring to GB 495 as:</u>		<u>Proportion of Students Not Mentioning GB 495</u>
	<u>"Greatest Benefit"</u>	<u>"Least Benefit"</u>	
Fall, 1975	0%	13%	87%
Spring, 1976	8%	12%	80%
Summer, 1976	29%	7%	64%

Although the time period is short, the trend is quite favorable. Apparently, the efforts at improving the operations and clarifying the role of the course have had a positive impact.

PROPOSED FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

The efforts to date have focused on improving the operational problems, increasing student exposure to actual work environments, and increasing the knowledge of how GB 495 helps the student prepare for a work-related career. With some satisfaction, these three areas appear to be substantially improved. However, two concerns remain.

The first area is the students' concern over the lack of a formal grade that potentially could improve the grade point average (GPA) of the student. As mentioned before, students today are very grade conscious -- particularly as they approach graduation. One possibility is a hybrid Credit/No Credit system where the instructor grants a few "A" grades to students whose work is substantially above the minimum required to obtain a "Credit" grade. This would leave the basic competency-based approach intact while creating the potential of a grade motivator for students with the ability and willingness to pursue a grade indicating "excellence."

The second area deals with the lack of a formal feedback and evaluation process between the students and instructor. The current role of the instructor is passive with counseling available upon request. A more active counseling and interactive role may lead to enhanced student experience and value [2, p. 115]. Skills needed in successful careers are developed not just from theory nor just from experience [2, p. 114]; a greater degree of interaction by the instructor may well assist the students in integrating both the theory and the experience to be better prepared for their careers. A more active counseling and integrative role by the Instructor appears to be the most fruitful area of future improvement in this required, senior-level "Experiential Business Applications" course.

REFERENCES

1. Brian Belt, "Experiential Business Applications--Course Objectives, Operations, and Materials," Published by the College of Business Administration, Texas A&I University at Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas, Fall, 1976.
2. Samuel C. Certo, "The Experiential Exercise Situation: A Comment on Instructional Role and Pedagogy Evaluation," Academy of Management Review, Vol. 1 (July, 1976), pp. 113-6.
3. L. N. Dyson, Jr., "Implementation of Experiential Business Applications," ABSEL 3rd Annual Conference, April, 1976.