

The Business Education Advantage for Closing the Employability Skills Gap

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Introduction

Business education has an important presence in the American educational system with some forms dating as far back as ancient Greece. While the early business education curriculum provided instruction in the development of basic office skills, today's curriculum "has developed into a multilevel discipline that embraces technology and provides preparation for students to work in a global marketplace and to function as intelligent consumers" (NBEA, 2013, p. 19). Business education transforms to the changing needs of society and continually prepares students in "occupational competence and ... economic efficiency" (NBEA, 2013, p. 19). Business education is positioned to prepare secondary and postsecondary students for a labor force that is projected to grow "from 159.2 million people in 2016 to 169.7 million people in 2026 - an increase of about 10.5 million people" (Lacey, Toossi, & Dunbina, 2017, para. 3). The 2018 job sectors classified as high-demand include health services, technology, hospitality, business and administration, and skilled trades (Trade Schools, Colleges, & Universities, 2018). The business education curriculum as a whole emphasizes continuous quality education. One aspect of the business education curriculum is to prepare students for career readiness, which is designed to encompass business topics and integrate other academic skills such as reading, writing, and math (PCBEE, 2014). Other aspects of the curriculum include developing employability skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication to ensure students can master the knowledge, applications, and attitudes that will reinforce workplace competencies (NBEA, n.d., para. 9). Business education with its rigorous and relevant curriculum is instrumental in preparing secondary and postsecondary students with the knowledge, application, and attitudes for high-demand careers.

How Business Education Supports High-Demand Sectors

Business education plays a key role in preparing students to be college and career ready in high-demand occupational sectors. With specialized curriculum in business management, business administration, finance, and information technology, business education prepares secondary and postsecondary students for entry-level positions such as administrative assistants, bank tellers, property and real estate managers, food service managers, lodging managers, and technical support specialists, among others.

Growth will be significant in the current and future high-demand sectors. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, employment of business and financial operations as well as administrative services managers is projected to grow 10 percent from 2016 to 2026 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018b). Healthcare service positions are anticipated to "account for 16 of the 30 fastest growing occupations from 2016 to 2026" (Lacey, Toossi, Dunbina, & Gensler, 2017, para. 3). Even more impressive is the growth in the

information technology sector which “is projected to grow 13 percent from 2016 to 2026, faster than the average for all occupations” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018a, para. 1).

All U.S. states and territories are using Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs “to prepare students of all ages for success in college and career by helping them develop the skills, technical knowledge, academic rigor and real-world experience for high-skill, high-demand, highly successful careers” (Advanced CTE, 2019b, para. 1). The National Career Clusters Framework provides the structure for CTE programs of study. This Framework includes 16 Career Clusters; and within these Clusters, there are more than 79 Career Pathways. Each Career Pathway is a comprehensive program of study that provides essential knowledge and skills that connect secondary and postsecondary curriculum (Advanced CTE, 2019a). Specific to the high-demand sectors, Career Pathways in business education include Business Management and Administration and Finance. Business education also supports Health Science and Information Technology Pathways, among others. The number of CTE concentrator enrollments in each of these Career Pathways, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2017), is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of CTE Concentrators Enrollment in Career Pathways

CTE Career Pathway	Secondary CTE Concentrator Enrollment	Postsecondary CTE Concentrator Enrollment	Percent of Increase/Decrease in Enrollment from 2016 - 2017	
			Secondary	Postsecondary
Business Management and Administration	409,993	305,019	+2.7	+1.6
Finance	121,244	28,120	+5.4	-13.1
Health Science	390,212	509,526	+9.2	-1.2
Information Technology	233,864	151,712	+10.2	+5.8

Note. CTE CONCENTRATOR.—The term ‘CTE concentrator’ means: (A) at the secondary school level, a student served by an eligible recipient who has completed at least 2 courses in a single career and technical education program or program of study; and (B) at the postsecondary level, a student enrolled in an eligible recipient who has (i) earned at least 12 credits within a career and technical education program or program of study or (ii) completed such a program if the program encompasses fewer than 12 credits or the equivalent in total.

Both the Business Management and Administration and Finance Career Pathways prepare students with the skills and knowledge to pursue careers that require postsecondary degree attainment, thus preparing students to be college and career ready. Presented in Table 2 are examples of secondary and postsecondary business education content that support the preparation for development of knowledge and skills in high-demand careers.

Table 2.

Business Education Course Content in High-Demand Areas

High-Demand Areas	Secondary Business Education Course Content	Postsecondary Business Education Course Content
Business Management and Administration	Accounting Business Communications Business Management Business Essentials Business Law Business Technology Applications Global Business Entrepreneurship Personal Finance Marketing Human Resource Management Customer Relations Economics Professional Development Business Ethics	Accounting Business Communications Business Management Information Technology and Applications Human Resources Management Global Business Project Management Business Ethics Marketing Management Information Systems Operations Management Supply Chain and Logistics Management Organizational Behavior Microeconomics and Macroeconomics Business Law Finance

		Statistics
Finance (may include content from the Business Management and Administration Pathway)	Accounting Banking Service Securities and Investments Insurance Economics Business Ethics	Accounting Banking Service Securities and Investments Insurance International Finance Microeconomics and Macroeconomics Analytics
Health Science	Business Technology Applications	
Information Technology	Programming/Coding Business Technology Applications Technical Writing Web Design	Information Technology and Applications Technical Writing Management Information Systems Programming/Coding

	Social Media Applications Computer Hardware and Software	Network Management Data Analytics
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Career Pathways in business education prepare secondary and postsecondary students for college and career readiness in high-demand sectors with curriculum that develops not only career-related content knowledge but also career employability skills. Presented in Table 3 are examples of employability skills business education develops in high-demand sectors.

Table 3.

Business Education Employability Skills for High-Demand Sectors

High-Demand Sectors	Employability Skills Developed in Secondary and Postsecondary Business Education
Business Management, Business Administration, and Finance	Business ethics Critical thinking Design, operation, and maintenance of technological systems Leadership Oral communications Problem solving Project management Teamwork Written communications
Health Services	Design, operation, and maintenance of technological systems

<p>Information Technology</p>	<p>Presentation management Videoconferencing Design, operation, and maintenance of technological systems Oral communications Problem solving</p>
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All Career Pathways have a limited number of courses based on graduation requirements and content area course work in the chosen pathway. An analysis of secondary and postsecondary Career Pathways in health services and information technology programs indicated a lack of business education course content taught by a licensed business educator at the secondary level and appropriately academically qualified instructors at the postsecondary level. This is concerning for these high-demand sectors. The healthcare industry is facing a shortage of qualified job applicants, not with technical skills, but with soft skills [employability skills] (iCIMS, 2017, para. 2). The top soft skills required in the healthcare profession are communication, teamwork, adaptability, empathy, and time management (iCIMS, 2017, para. 3). Similar to the healthcare field, professionals in information technology often have exceptional technical skills, but “the lack of soft skills [employability skills] like communication skills, analytical skills, interpersonal skills, negotiation skills etc. are becoming the issues of greater concern in this rapidly growing industry” (Agarwal & Ahuja, 2014, p. 85).

Business education has long been a leader in preparing students for career readiness with curriculum focused on both technical and employability skill development in business and industry. However, course content deemed as business education is not often part of the required curriculum in health services and information technology pathways. With the growing concern over the development of employability or career-readiness skills in high-demand occupational sectors, it is time to integrate business education into all disciplines. Business education is the advantage for closing the employability skills gap.

The Business Education Advantage

Nearly two decades ago the Policy Commission for Business and Economic Education Policy Statement 67 “This We Believe About Teaching the Soft Skills: Human Relations, Self-Management, and Workplace Enhancement” (2000) sounded the alarm that being only a technically competent employee will not be enough in the 21st Century. In addition to technical competence, employees will be required to display collaboration, critical thinking, ethical behavior, and self-management to be successful in today’s global and diverse work place. However, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *Class of 2017 Student Survey* reported at the postsecondary level:

Employers and graduating seniors differed greatly when it came to rating proficiency in competencies such as professionalism/work ethic, oral/written

communications, and leadership as students considered themselves much more proficient than did employers. The gap between the two groups was greatest when it came to students' professionalism and work ethic; nearly 90 percent of students considered themselves proficient in this area, but less than half of employers agreed. (2018, para. 3)

Business education has a strong curriculum that provides an advantage for students to be both college and career ready. Business educators are long-time leaders in addressing the employability skills gap through business education course content and experiential learning, including student organization involvement.

Business education courses develop employability skills in the areas of communications, problem solving and critical thinking, organizational systems, leadership and teamwork, ethics and legal responsibilities, among others. For example, Business Essentials is a foundational course in the Business Management and Administration career cluster in which students:

- develop academic skills in mathematics, economics, and written and oral communications
- examine current events to determine their impact on business and industry and legal and ethical behavior
- acquire knowledge of safe and secure environmental controls to enhance productivity
- determine how resources should be managed to achieve company goals, and identify employability and personal skills needed to obtain a career and be successful in the workplace
- interpret industry laws and regulations to ensure compliance
- identify principles of business management and analyze business practices to determine ethics and social responsibilities

The introduction of employability skill development in this one course could benefit students in all disciplines. Additional business education courses further develop these and other employability skills through the reinforcement and content building of knowledge and application. Integrating business courses that improve employability skills in the health services and information technology curriculum can be accomplished with teacher collaboration. Collaborating with health services and information technology on curriculum redesign that includes business courses related to employability skills will benefit students in these occupational areas. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2017) noted K-12 educators lack the resources to implement teaching employability skills on their own, therefore collaborating with business education can be an advantageous solution.

Collaboration is not without its challenges. While the idea of collaboration is promising for student success, the challenge to find time for collaboration is less favorable. Johnson

and Tsai (2018) reported, “only 31 percent of teachers reported that they have sufficient time to collaborate with other teachers” (p. 1). In addition Johnson and Tsai described other factors that hinder collaboration as limited instructional support from administrators and teacher autonomy. These challenges should not deter interdisciplinary collaboration, but rather be set as a priority within school districts to begin improving the lack of employability skills.

Conclusion

Business education prepares secondary and postsecondary students for employment in today’s high-demand occupational sectors. The curriculum is dynamic, rigorous, and relevant in preparing both technical and employability skills. Business education prepares students in high-demand business areas with coursework that builds upon technical skills to develop communication, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork skills, among others. Curricula preparing students for other high-demand occupational sectors such as healthcare and information technology focus on the technical requirements, but often lack the development of employability skills needed in these industries. Including core business education courses in the health services and information technology pathways can provide the necessary content needed to develop employability skills. Business education is the advantage for closing the employability skills gap.

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