

A Comparison of Introduction to Business Courses at Top-Ranked Schools

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ABSTRACT

First impressions play a key role in setting the expectations for a student's course of study. As such, the first business course that students take is critical in establishing high expectations for the students and for the college. While some schools may use Introduction to Accounting as its first course, other schools may develop a separate Introduction to Business (I2B) type of course. As the first business course, the I2B course can be used to achieve several objectives. However, little is written about the nature and content of the I2B course; this paper attempts to address that shortcoming by offering a descriptive look at a variety of I2B courses at a variety of top-ranked business schools.

Keywords: introduction to business, first year experience, freshmen, setting expectations

INTRODUCTION

Little has been written about the first business course that students take, yet it could be considered one of the most critical courses offered by a business school. Such a course could be used to set expectations for what the rest of the business curriculum will be like, and to get students excited about the field of business. While many schools may use an Introduction to Accounting as their first business course, several schools have opted to create an Introduction to Business (I2B) course.

The content of an Introductory Accounting course is fairly standard across schools, but the same cannot be said for the I2B course. Some schools teach what could be considered a traditional I2B course that offers a broad overview of the world of business and its functional areas. Other schools may use the course to serve multiple purposes such as professional development, improving communications skills, and teamwork. A few schools may offer what might be collectively referred to as a first year experience type of course for its business students.

The I2B course provides the opportunity to introduce students to the world of business, to get them excited about the wide range of career possibilities, and to expose the students to the wide range of resources available to them on campus. The I2B course is the student's first impression of the world of business, and of the business school, and first impressions matter.

Having an effective and enjoyable I2B course can pave the way for students to become engaged members of the business school community and allow the business school to establish what the culture of their school is like, and what is expected of its students.

Overview of I2B courses

This paper offers a brief descriptive overview of the I2B courses offered at a variety of schools. Using the most recent [Bloomberg BusinessWeek](#) rankings of the top 25 undergraduate programs (Levy, 2016) as a starting point, a search of each school's curriculum was undertaken.

Based on this analysis, it was discovered that 17 of the 25 schools offer some type of I2B course. While the set of schools that will be looked at in the following pages are likely not representative of all business schools, being aware of the variety of approaches to teaching the I2B course should be useful information for all schools. In addition, the hope is that this paper will bring to light some innovative approaches to the I2B course that are not captured by the 17 schools described below. As noted previously, not much has been written about the I2B course, but hopefully after this overview, faculty will be willing to share their school's approach to the I2B course. As more becomes written about the I2B course, faculty can then pick and choose what they see as the best ideas from a variety of approaches and create a course that is most effective for its students and their school.

The descriptions of the I2B courses given below are presented in alphabetical order by the name of the University/College. That should make it easier for the reader to look for a particular school of interest. As will be

seen, there was a varying amount of information available about these I2B courses, and a link is provided to where the information was provided.

After the course descriptions there is a table that compares the variety of approaches to the I2B course at these 17 schools on a variety of dimensions. After the table, there is a brief summary and analysis of the comparisons.

Bentley University

Bentley offers what it refers to as its First Year Seminar. The seminar is a mandatory one-credit course for all first year students that is co-taught by a faculty member along with an upper-class student. The seminar utilizes classroom discussions, informational sessions, and readings that focus on issues relevant to academic success at Bentley. Course requirements include mandatory attendance at informational sessions, participation in small group discussions and a culminating journal reflecting on one's personal experience and development during the fall semester. Each faculty member will serve as the academic advisor for the students in that class for their first year at Bentley. Students will be required to meet individually with their advisor to discuss and select their spring classes.

Boston College (Carroll School of Management)

In 2006, an interdisciplinary team of faculty gathered to discuss the Carroll School undergraduate curriculum. A freshman seminar was designed and was named Portico, symbolizing the formational and developmental aspirations of the course.

Portico offers the beginning student a unique opportunity to situate contemporary business in a context that is global and historical; learn about business through engagement with faculty and practitioners; develop a nuanced method for recognizing and responding to the ethical challenges of contemporary business; and raise questions about personal aspirations and the opportunities available in the world of work. As its faculty creators—a team blending the talents of the Carroll School of Management and the College of Arts and Sciences—described it, “the basic framework for the class is a funnel in which we move from macro to micro/personal issues.” During the first half of the course, we begin with a wide and historically informed consideration of global, national, and regional issues and end with a discussion of industry, organizational, and functional issues. During the second half of the course, the ‘funnel’ narrows and we consider more personal issues, including ethics, leadership, and personal/professional development. The choice of readings and assignments is designed to reinforce the interconnections across the levels of the funnel. (from the online syllabus found at <http://www.caseplace.org/pdfs/Syllabus%20-%20Portico%20-%20MH100.23.pdf>)

The course includes a good deal of writing, team-based assignments, a four-year trajectory assignment, and a self-assessment exercise that reinforces Jesuit principles.

Cornell University (Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management)

The Business Management and Organization course offered at the Dyson School is a foundational course, meant to familiarize students with the use of core concepts in marketing, accounting, organizational design and management, entrepreneurship and strategy, teamwork, leadership, and ethics; as well as with the majors and the business careers that may follow it. Significant writing and analytical components are part of the course, along with both individual and team based case study analysis, as well as the evaluation of a U.S. publicly traded corporation. The use of tools such as Excel for analysis is also part of the course.

Georgetown University (McDonough School of Business)

Georgetown offers its freshmen the option to take a seminar known as the First Year Seminar (FYS) Program. FYS is an exciting way for first-year students to investigate the nature of scholarship, think about important ideas in business, and achieve intellectual and personal growth. By engaging in peer discussions and developing a mentoring relationship with faculty, students explore diverse business topics and learn about government and nonprofit organizations in Washington, D.C.

The FYS Program includes a lecture series in which students meet several times during the semester to hear lectures by faculty who introduce the fields of study in business and illustrate how scholarly research can help answer important global public policy questions. FYS also has a case competition component, in which students develop a strategic solution that addresses current business challenges facing a local nonprofit organization. Faculty and advanced undergraduates coach each team, and finalists present their strategic recommendations to executives at the client organization. For the Fall 2016 semester, the non-profit organization was the 11th Street Bridge Park.

Georgetown offer a variety of FYS programs, and allows students to choose, prior to their arrival at school, which FYS program they are most interested in. Here is a listing of the seminars that were offered during the Fall, 2016 semester.

- Heroes and Villains: Character and Leadership in a Global Context
- The Ethics of Entrepreneurship
- The Real Estate Game
- Grand Strategy: Conceptual Foundations in Strategic Thought
- Competing in a Flat World
- Wall Street and Main Street: The Wealth Divide
- Marketing in a Connected World
- Patterns of Global Commerce
- The Supreme Court, Civil Liberties, and the Regulation of the Global Marketplace

Indiana University (Kelley School of Business)

The Kelley School offers a three course sequence that takes place over a student's first three years. Referred to as the Kelley Compass, this is a "talent management system" for personal and professional development, while also enriching its academic program to deepen students' facility with global business, ethics, and critical thinking.

Each of the more than 900 incoming students will be assigned a career advisor and an academic advisor who will track with the student over three years and collaborate with Compass course instructors, ensuring the greatest possible support, coaching, and counsel.

Here is a brief description of the three course sequence:

- I: The Individual (first year). Focuses on Who am I? What do I want? How am I going to get there? Through interest/skills inventories, students develop self-awareness, discover what's possible and what they want. They analyze their cultural/ethical influences, life experiences and values/priorities, and prepare skills/activities resumes.
- II: The Team (sophomores). Immerses students in teamwork, building critical-thinking skills and cross-cultural competence. Working with local and virtual teams, students learn to manage first impressions; manage conflicting ethics; lead meetings; prepare mock interviews; produce a product; and practice business etiquette.
- III: The Professional (juniors). Provides a practical approach to leadership and decision-making, focusing on setting goals, forming action plans and assessing results. Students will work on multi-dimensional team projects and examine perspectives from a variety of individuals with vested interests.

University of Michigan (Stephen M. Ross School of Business)

Students are not formally accepted into the Ross School until their sophomore year, but prior to that, students have the option of taking Introduction to Ross: Foundations in Learning Business. This course introduces students to the world of business while supporting their transition and building a collaborative learning community, providing students with a foundation to make the most of their time at the Ross School of Business and the University of Michigan. To accomplish this goal, the course blends three interrelated topics that explore: 1. What is business, what do businesses do, and what does it mean to be business literate? 2. How can you engage in building a collaborative culture at Ross, and what's the value in doing so? 3. What is needed for you to transition successfully as a Ross business student?

Once the student is officially a part of the business school, all students enroll in Businesses and Leaders: The Positive Differences. In this course, we explore the competing tensions of how business practices and leaders impact organizational performance as well as broader social outcomes across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. We will look at social issues that arise from business operations that result in threats to public goods and market failures; how societal issues create space for business opportunities; and the leveraging of corporate resources to solve societal problems that create values for stakeholders and shareholders. In addition to studying the role of business in society, this course examines personal and professional responsibility. This will entail students examining the connections between personal values, career goals, ethical decision making, and moral courage. Also, students will

reflect upon their responsibilities and contributions to the Ross community and the business profession, and develop personal plans to guide their actions.

New York University (Leonard N. Stern School of Business)

Stern has a [Cohort Leadership Program](#) which is meant to introduce freshmen students to the world of business through an engaging innovation project that will allow them to reflect on their leadership style and build strong connections with other Stern students and the school.

To prepare NYU Stern undergraduates for a world that is changing fast and business leaders need cutting-edge innovation to remain relevant this dynamic world, Stern puts all freshmen through the flagship Cohort Leadership Program, which is focused on leadership through innovation. In this 11 week freshmen seminar, students are introduced to design thinking, a powerful entrepreneurship tool for inspiring innovative solutions through human centered observations, interviews, ideation, and execution. Students work in small teams within their cohorts to develop business solutions to a real world problem. The project this past year had students find solutions to help college students make healthier food choices.

Northeastern University (D'Amore-McKim School of Business)

There is a [two-course sequence](#) for freshmen who enroll at D'Amore-McKim. The first course is Experiential Entrepreneurship, which blends theoretical principles with real-life application and introduces the fundamentals of launching, growing, and managing a business venture in today's dynamic and increasingly global environment. The course examines concepts within multiple academic disciplines and from multiple perspectives—including marketing, technology, finance, accounting, information systems, people, and culture—and then applies them to new ventures within varied types of organizations. The course offers students an opportunity to develop an entrepreneurial skill set and mind-set through the development of the critical thinking, innovative decision making, problem solving, and team building needed for any business, large or small.

The second course is Personal Skill Development for Business which offers first-year students an opportunity to achieve a better understanding of themselves as students and as future professionals. The course explores self-analysis, leadership traits and styles, diversity and cultural awareness, professionalism, emotional intelligence, and ethics, and encourages students to draw connections among classroom education, extracurricular activities, and practical experiences and to identify how each component fits into the pursuit of their individual goals.

Ohio State University (Fisher College of Business)

[Business Skills and Environment](#) is the introductory course required of all undergraduate students in The Fisher College of Business. The course format is a weekly lecture, a weekly recitation section, and a weekly workshop. This course introduces students to the role of business in the lives of individuals, consumers, employees, and citizens. It also introduces the concept of ethical leadership and emphasizes both oral and written communication skills for the business environment. Students will be required to do several written assignments as well as present both as individuals and in teams. Students are also introduced to ethical approaches to problem solving.

Penn State University (Smeal College of Business)

Smeal College offers a [first-year seminar](#) that meets in 50-minute class periods once per week. The diverse faculty consists of experienced business teachers, corporate professionals, and higher education practitioners. The seminar is designed to be an interactive learning experience by engaging the students with each other and the instructor. Accordingly, the course requires cooperation, participation, and interaction among all class participants. The topics presented and the skills learned are applicable to college as well as the corporate environment. The course uses textbook reading, class discussions, in-class presentations, and experiential exercises throughout the semester. In addition to academic business content, one of the main components of the seminar is a review of majors in the College and the careers those majors traditionally lead to after graduation. Students work in teams to conduct research and deliver a presentation to their classmates on a specific area of business. Other seminar topics include: Time Management & Goal Setting, University Resources, Study Skills, Teamwork, Leadership, Ethics, Community Service and Corporate Citizenship, Diversity and Workplace Diversity, and a Business Simulation Case Study.

Syracuse University (Martin J. Whitman School of Management)

The Whitman School offers a required freshmen year course known as [Perspectives of Business and Management](#). The course catalog description notes that the objectives of the course are: understanding of role and responsibility of management in society; fundamental knowledge of nature and integration of functional disciplines in business; skills

essential to effective management; and development of base for academic/career mission and achievement. In addition to the academic content offered by this course, all Whitman students are part of the college's Impress program that quantifies extracurricular activities, promotes healthy competition, and prepares Whitman students to be the best business professionals they can be. Each incoming student is assigned to one of four "houses", and can earn points for themselves and their house by attending extracurricular events scheduled throughout the year such as leadership lectures and workshops, guest speakers, and professional and personal development sessions.

University of Pennsylvania (The Wharton School)

Beginning in the Fall of 2017, the Wharton School will require all freshmen to take Wharton 101: First Year Gateway/Business Pathways. Wharton 101 is the gateway course of a four-year Leadership Journey and features professors and alumni in conversations about critical problems, research, and leadership in a series of sessions spanning the School's curricular areas. The course objectives are to:

- Introduce students to the wide range of curricular opportunities available at Wharton
- Make students more aware of their strengths and leadership potential
- Orient students to the Wharton experience and empower them to become engaged members of the scholarly and co-curricular community

This course is graded on a pass/fail basis. The other courses in this Leadership Journey program are: Oral and Written Communications, Teamwork and Personal Dynamics, and Senior Capstone Course or Project. The primary goals of the revised curriculum are to offer students greater flexibility in pursuing academic interests outside of the Wharton curriculum, add more dimensions to the Wharton core, and better familiarize students with the many different ways that technology and innovation can be applied to Wharton's concentrations.

University of Texas (McCombs School of Business)

Professional Development & Career Planning is a required course that all undergraduate business students take prior to graduation. This course presents the foundations for executing a successful job search and focuses on career management as a lifelong process. The course assists students with planning, implementing, and evaluating their careers. After completing this course, students should have: created a resume, identified and applied job search related communication tools, gained an understanding of the nature and value of networking and marketing themselves, and utilized interview techniques to complete a mock interview.

Villanova University

First semester freshmen at the Villanova School of Business are enrolled in Business Dynamics (BD). The course emphasizes the overarching purpose of business within society and the manner in which business vision is actualized. Business Dynamics provides context for students' business learning experience and integrates global, political, ethical, and technological dimensions of business. The course serves as the first step in preparing students to become creative and innovative problem solvers, and seeks to develop analytical business writing and presentation skills.

In addition to covering the basic concepts included in a traditional Introduction to Business course, Business Dynamics also includes a Professional Development (PD) component that requires students to attend three PD events during the semester, and write a reflection paper on each event. The papers must be written in certain formats, including a business email, a memo, and a blog. The course also includes individual and team presentations.

Each year the BD faculty also choose a book that will be integrated into the course to serve as an example of many of the concepts discussed in the course. Past books have included *Do the KIND Thing, Start Something That Matters*, and *Conscious Capitalism*. Known as the Read to Lead program, it is sponsored by EY, the global professional services firm.

Wake Forest University

In "Why Business?", students explore the question of what the role of business is in a humane and just society. In this course, students look at both classic and contemporary discussions of the nature, benefits, and limits of a market economy, and consider various objections, including moral objections, to commercial society. The course also looks at several functional areas of business and investigate the extent to which they can contribute to a humane and just society.

Washington University in St. Louis (Olin Business School)

Freshmen at the Olin School take two courses concurrently to introduce them to the world of business. The first course is Individual in a Managerial Environment is an introduction to the foundations of business. The course covers four major themes: (1) how markets work; (2) motivating and managing people; (3) business strategy and firm performance; (4) ethics and corporate social responsibility.

The second course is Foundations of Business which provides first semester business students with an introduction to each of the functional areas of business as well as the entrepreneurial function. As they work to design their own enterprise, students will build skills in teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and an understanding of the complex interplay of business functions. Each group of students creates a (hypothetical) consumer product to be sold in a retail establishment. Each week, after members of Olin's senior faculty teach the first year students about a discipline within business, the students apply their knowledge to determine how the discipline impacts their product.

William and Mary (Raymond A. Mason School of Business)

Business Perspectives and Applications is designed to complement the core courses in the undergraduate program by integrating business disciplines, ethical considerations, and business communications. The course includes business simulations, team interaction, and presentation skills.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The table below offers a comparison of these I2B courses along a variety of dimensions. The first column offers just some basic course logistics information: what year the course is offered, how many credit hours the course is worth, whether the course is required, and if it is taken pass/fail. The next column notes whether professional communications is a key part of the course, including specific written and oral assignments. If such information could not be clearly determined, the column was marked NA. The Professional Development (PD) column works the same as the Communications column; if it appeared that PD (resume/interviewing/etiquette) was a significant part of the course, the response was yes; otherwise it was NA. The Survey of Business Disciplines column is used to indicate if the course covers business content such as management, marketing, finance, and accounting. For the Course Project column, if it appeared as if projects were a key part of the course, then the project was appropriately classified. The Special Notes column is designed to highlight one or more of the key distinguishing features of the course at that institution.

The table reveals that there is no standard approach to the I2B course. From a logistics perspective, the most common approach is to have a required I2B course during freshmen year, but that is not always the case, as evidenced by Ohio State and William & Mary. Some schools focus more on Professional Communications and Development, others emphasize Business Disciplines, but most seem to cover all three categories. Teamwork seems to be another common theme. Some schools offer its students the opportunity to work on real-world business projects, others use simulations, case studies, and other hands-on approaches as a way to bring the material to life.

Table 1: Comparison of Introduction to Business Courses at 17 Top-Ranked Schools

School	Yearr Offered/ Credit hours/ Required	Professional Communica- tions	Professional Development	Survey of Business Disciplines	Course Projects (team vs. individual)	Special Notes
Bentley	Fr/1/yes	NA	Yes	No	Individual	Focus is on how to achieve academic success; personal journal
Boston College	Fr/3/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Self-assessment exercise; four-year trajectory assignment
Cornell	Fr/4/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	comprehensive analysis of a US publicly traded corporation
Georgetown	Fr/3/no	NA	NA	Yes	Team case competition	Multiple versions of seminar based on faculty preference
Indiana	Fr/1.5/yes	NA	Yes	Yes	individual	Each student creates his/her own team, You, Inc.; part of 3-year Kelly Compass program
Michigan	Fr/1/yes* So/3/yes	NA NA	Yes Yes	Yes Yes	NA NA	*Required for most students; first line is for Intro to Ross course; second line is for Businesses and Leaders course
NYU	Fr/0/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Team	Small teams work on real-world problems using design thinking
Northeastern	Fr/4/yes* Fr/0/yes	Yes NA	No Yes	Yes NA	Team	Two course sequence; first course is Experiential Entrepreneurship; second course is Personal Skill Development for Business; *required for most students
Ohio State	So/3/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Team	Focus on ethical decision making and communications skills
Penn State	Fr/1/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Strong focus on choosing a major
Syracuse	Fr/3/yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Team	Part of College's IMPRESS program
Penn	Fr/.5/yes pass/fail	NA	Yes	Yes	Individual	Part of a four year integrated Leadership Journey
Texas	Fr/1/yes	Yes	Yes	No	Individual	Focus on career planning and development
Villanova	Fr/3/yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Integrated professional development and communications component
Wake Forest	Fr/3/yes	NA	NA	Yes	NA	Focuses on the role of business in a humane and just society
Washington U.	Fr/3/yes Fr/2/yes	NA Yes	NA Yes	Yes NA	NA Team	First line is for Individual in a Managerial Environment; second line is for Foundations of Business
William & Mary	Jr/1/yes pass/fail	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Part of an integrated junior year core; integrates business disciplines

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper is to provide a starting point for creating a repository of information about the nature and content of the first academic business course/experience that business schools require of its students by looking at the offerings of several of the Bloomberg Businessweek Top 25 programs.

As such, the hope is that other schools which have created innovative introduction to business courses will share their ideas so that schools looking to implement or innovate their I2B course will have a valuable set of resources to draw upon. The next step for further exploration would be in-depth looks at some of the more innovative and successful implementations of the I2B course, whether it comes from this list of schools, or from other colleges.

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