

Business Thought and Action

An Intensive Case-Based Course for Sophomores

M MICHIGAN
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CRLT

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BA 201 Business Thought and Action

A new class for Ross School of Business sophomores, BA 201 was first offered in Winter 2010. This team-taught, case-intensive course has four key learning objectives:

- 1 To provide an overall framework for students' future courses in the Business School.
- 2 To see the broad array of areas of applicability of "business" skills to many types of organizations (Fortune 500-type firms, start-ups, non-profits, governments) and to many of their activities.
- 3 To grasp the dynamic nature of business and how the continual changes in the landscape—due to macroeconomic factors, emergence of competitors, governmental activities—present new challenges to firms and individuals within them."
- 4 To create an understanding of the need for "lifelong" learning and methods of accomplishing that in a business context by learning from thoughtful reflection on one's own experiences and learning by reading and discussing general business activity.

▶ **Key assessments were participation (30%), weekly written assignments (35%) and a final exam (35%).**

▶ **Enrollment: 56 students took the class in 2010 and 68 students enrolled in 2011.**

Sample Case Discussions

Industries and companies discussed:

Amusement Six Flags	Diamond Retailing Blue Nile Tiffany Zales	Manufacturing General Electric General Mills Kodak	Retail Build-a-Bear Gap Left Shoe NIKEiD Timberland
Automotive Ford Tata Nano Toyota ZipCar	Drugs Glaxo Zantac	Markets eBay StubHub SwapTree	Technology Apple Dell HCL Technologies Nokia
Beverage Snapple	Housing Toll Brothers	Restaurants Domino's McDonald's	

Evaluation Methods

Two pieces of the BA 201 evaluation are presented here:

- 1 A survey was distributed to all former students, assessing their perceived achievement of general and course-specific learning outcomes. There was a 72% response rate (N=89). Four respondents were alumni.
- 2 To provide greater depth to the survey data, Dr. Wright also held a 75-minute focus group with nine seniors who completed BA 201.

Key Findings

Former BA 201 students agreed that the course enhanced their learning of all course objectives.

Table 1: Level of agreement that BA 201 enhanced skills and knowledge (N=89)

Scale is 1-5 (1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree).	Mean	Standard Deviation
Understanding of the different areas of business (e.g., marketing, strategy) and how they fit together	4.55	0.66
Ability to investigate a complex case or business problem from more than one perspective	4.50	0.86
Ability to use evidence to support a point of view in classroom discussion	4.45	0.84
Interest in a future career in business	4.43	0.98
Confidence in investigating a complex case or business problem from more than one perspective	4.40	1.02
Ability to make connections between my BBA courses, i.e., to see how ideas and skills presented in my other BBA courses fit together	4.39	0.87
Understanding of uncertainty and risk in business problem-solving	4.31	0.91
Understanding of dynamic nature of business, e.g., changes in government policy or emergence of competitors	4.28	1.07
Preparation for a future career in business	4.27	0.94
Preparation for junior- or senior-level BBA courses	4.26	1.10
Ability to act ethically in a future career	4.11	1.02
Confidence in participating in a U-M classroom discussion	4.03	1.25
Preparation for future graduate or professional study	3.94	1.05



Transfer of Learning

A sizable majority of students (70%) reported applying their learning, or provided an example of how the skills they learned will help them analyze business information in the future. Key applications named in the survey and focus group discussions were:

Current Employment

"The analytical skills I learned in BA 201 helped me to secure my position and are now helping me thrive in it."

Interviews

"BA 201 helped me while I was interviewing—as I analyzed real company problems and gave my opinions."

Further Coursework

"I have applied this knowledge to other business classes and history classes I have taken."

Career Choices

"The class on microfinance really sparked a lot of my passions."

Daily Business-Related Competencies

"What I learned is particularly useful for investing in a company's stock."

When asked about features of the course that promoted such strong reported gains, focus group participants named the strong perspectives brought by instructors, intensive case-based discussions, current and well-written cases, and written assignments. A student summarized:

"They challenged us to push ourselves."