

# Empowering Business Students: The Rise of Experiential Learning, Collaborative Mentoring, and Data Science

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## *Abstract*

*The core mission of public business schools has significantly expanded given the unprecedented challenges that we face today. Public Business schools, in particular, carry additional responsibilities for accessibility and equitable student success. They typically operate in a resource constrained environment and are charged to develop innovative approaches to build student learning experience and job skills while being a responsible steward of public resources. Towards that end, we discuss in this article some recent approaches to reimagining and reinvigorating the business student experience in the post pandemic era. In particular, we focus on cross-functional experiential learning, collaborative student mentoring, and teaching data science and analytics for business students, which are increasingly becoming more crucial across leading business schools.*

## **Introduction**

The global pandemic and fast-advancing technologies have fundamentally transformed the business world. For example, mobile access to a full array of banking services has been now widely adapted to meet evolving customer expectations. According to a recent study by McKinsey, about 11% of US customers used telehealth in 2019 versus today's

approximately 46%.<sup>1</sup> In restaurant industries, innovative economic models such as new off-premise channels and re-engineered menus have become differentiators to thrive.<sup>2</sup> In shipping and logistics, timely communication between suppliers and customers have become even more critical.<sup>3</sup> In the entertainment industry, traditional models are increasingly being replaced by streaming services, such as Netflix, Hulu, Apple TV+ and Amazon Prime.<sup>4</sup> The new technologies offer customers a more immersive and customizable experience as well as the flexibility of anytime and anywhere on-demand services, and the adoption of new technologies has been accelerated by the pandemic.

As the business world has changed forever, so have the business schools.<sup>5</sup> Leading business schools have already acknowledged this and started to re-examine their curricula. The theme of the 2021 Innovations in Undergraduate and Graduate Innovation Conference was particularly apt: “Forever Changed: Envisioning B-School 2030.”<sup>6</sup> The pandemic has amplified existing challenges around inclusion, retention, affordability, and demographic cliffs, while introducing new ones internally and externally.

*Internally*, business schools are charged to achieve equitable student success within limited resources, while managing their expectations.<sup>7</sup> Students are increasingly looking for more choices, more personalized options and flexibility, reputable quality and better ROI, career services plus career planning.<sup>8</sup> Many of them also face food insecurity, healthcare and housing issues, as well as financial hardship.

*Externally*, we face a fast-changing world of technology which requires us to be agile and responsive to digital transformation and prepare students to be academically and professionally ready for lifelong learning. Meanwhile, companies want better prepared students who *are problem solvers* – having the skills needed to solve problems with a solid understanding of global issues, and *mindful executers* – taking a full responsibility for implementation.

Nearly 1.3 million students have disappeared from American colleges during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Business schools also have to fight to be chosen from among the many emerging low-cost alternatives that also help students to build job skills, from Coursera, edX, Academic Earth, to LinkedIn online skills learning.<sup>10</sup> This fight will only continue to intensify since “*The nature of work and careers is changing fast - and in the future, the right skills will be prized over academic qualifications alone.*”<sup>11</sup> Business schools need to demonstrate the value proposition and ROI of a business degree, which have become bottom line issues.

The core mission of the business schools - instruction, research, and service—has not changed. However, the definition and expectation of

instruction, research, and service have significantly expanded given the unprecedented challenges, especially for public business schools. Public Business schools carry additional responsibilities for accessibility and equitable student success to deliver the promise of public business education. They face extra pressure to develop new strategies and innovative approaches to create a high-quality student learning experience and prepare larger cohorts of students with solid job skills while using limited resources. Toward that end, we discuss in this article some recent approaches to reimagining and reinvigorating the business student experience in the post pandemic era. In particular, we focus on new trends in *cross-functional experiential learning*, *collaborative student mentoring*, and *teaching data sciences for business students*, which are increasingly becoming more crucial for leading business schools.

### Cross Functional Experiential Learning

Business Schools are known for their **emphasis on** offering experiential learning and real-world training as part of the core curriculum. Traditionally, experiential learning at B-schools has been implemented in several ways, from HBS case studies, team-based capstone/client projects, immersion courses, and simulation studies, to internship, co-ops, or apprenticeship programs, business case and/or plan competitions and so on. For students, the knowledge and skills gained from experiential learning make them more valuable and marketable to employers.

For business schools offering experiential learning programs, one of the new trends has been to help students to gain a better understanding of how different business functions (e.g., marketing and sales, engineering, procurement, public relations, etc.) interact and what are the potential cross-functional opportunities, which is the goal of *cross-functional experiential learning*. In this section, we highlight some exemplary programs, each with its own unique features, in *cross-functional experiential learning*.

Undergraduate entrepreneurship programs offer opportunities for young students to explore their creativity, build resilience, and develop important skills in collaborating, communicating and leadership. Examples of such cross-functional start-up projects could range from customized food delivery service, children's party organization, and **all-natural** mosquito repellent to organic food store and online baby clothing, just to name a few. Studying entrepreneurship as part of an undergraduate program has become an exemplary way of cross-functional experiential learning.

UC-Berkeley undergraduate entrepreneurship program, called **Changemaker**, exemplifies such cross-functional experiential learning that inspires students to think beyond their own discipline. The Program offers

25 rigorous courses by 30 academic departments across 11 school units at UC Berkeley.<sup>12</sup> The impact and reputation of the program have been further enhanced by the involvement of world-class researchers and influential alumni founders. Offered through the College of Letters and Science and the Haas School of Business, the Berkeley Changemaker has been a joint effort of many faculty members and administrators. The goal of this program is to motivate students to learn critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills which are critical for the success of future workforce.

*The Princeton Review* and *Entrepreneur* ranked the top undergraduate programs for studying entrepreneurship.<sup>13</sup> The rankings report indicated that “students who enroll at these schools will find themselves at the forefront of innovation and development, often with an interdisciplinary focus that acknowledges the interconnectedness of today's economy.” University of Houston, UT-Austin, and Babson College were recognized as the top three undergraduate entrepreneurship programs. The Entrepreneurship program offered at University of Houston has produced 779 startup companies during the last five years. The program has appointed over 500 mentors with a heavy focus on inter-functional approach involving Engineering, Natural Science, Mathematics, Computer Science, Industrial Design, Communications, Law and other field of studies. The UT-Austin program is embedded in a rich entrepreneurship community with many supporting institutions across campus working together. The program offers 51 entrepreneurship courses for its undergraduate students, support from its Entrepreneur-In-Residence and pre-accelerator programs, immense access to opportunities at startups, and has helped launch over 250 startup companies. Babson College is known to create a campus culture that makes *entrepreneurship a way of life*. Entrepreneurship is a required course for every single Babson student, and the entire Babson campus is an innovation hub where students can learn from successful entrepreneurs of different fields and develop a thorough knowledge about business functions and practices of launching a startup. The school has also trained over 5,000 faculty from all over the world through its unique pedagogy of teaching entrepreneurship.

Comparing to many leading programs in the country, the Rutgers experiential learning programs are relatively new, but offer students a unique experience through both heavy industrial collaboration and **community engagement**. All projects require students from different disciplines to work together to develop real life solutions with a focus on **positive social impact**, whether it is an entrepreneurship project, an emerging challenge facing a large community, a company sponsored project, or a small business development need. Students are immersed in an academic environment with vast opportunities for experiential learning. For examples, the Rutgers Center

for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development (The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development | Rutgers Business School) for years has provided training to hundreds social entrepreneurs and helped launch many successful startups. The Rutgers Public, Private, Community Partnership Program (Public Private Community Partnership Program | Rutgers Business School) has been leading many community partnership projects such as buy-local and hire-local initiatives to support NJ economic development. The Supply Chain Management Department works closely with many large companies to offer yearly around cross-functional team projects for students. Among many team projects that Rutgers undergraduate students participated, one of them won the \$1 million Global Hult Prize upon their proposal for a rickshaw transportation business to improve the lives of refugees children overseas.<sup>14</sup> The Rutgers Advanced Institute for the Study of Entrepreneurship and Development (RAISED | Rutgers Business School) and the Rutgers-Newark Urban Solution Lab (The Urban Solutions Lab | Living Learning Community of Rutgers Newark) bring together faculty, students across campus, and visiting entrepreneurs to develop skills and connections to innovate solutions to local versions of grand social challenges. Rutgers students also have learning opportunities through the NJ Small Business Development Center (NJSBDC) housed in Rutgers Business School. Given that NJ has over 900,000 small businesses, this connection opens many opportunities for students to be engaged in real life cross-functional experiential learning with a meaningful social impact.

Cross-functional experiential learning reflects the practices of a cross-functional team at a real company well, which has been so critical given the ever-increasing complexity and uncertainty of today's business environment. What many company recruiters have enjoyed most is the ability undergraduate students demonstrated through cross-functional team projects upon a 360-degree view of the business challenges which cannot be easily achieved through traditional experiential learning.

### **Collaborative Student Mentoring**

There was a time when students perceived college as a rite of passage and did not really get serious about a job search until the senior year of their studies. Mentoring was delivered by faculty primarily only to students who had the foresight to reach out and seek guidance. Times have changed. Nowadays, it takes careful planning and mentoring to prepare students for successful future careers in business; and mentoring and select career-track programs commence as soon as students join the B-School.

While the faculty still play a valuable role as mentors, the need for mentoring has outstripped their capability to meet students' needs and

faculty mentors have been supplemented and even superseded by professional mentoring programs. In fact, such programs have become the norm across the leading B-schools. First generation college students, and students from underrepresented minority populations also tend to benefit more from extensive mentoring more, since they are less likely to rely on their networks for guidance or to even have anyone in their network within industries of interest.

There is no one-fits-all solution. Best practices include understanding the needs of different student groups and designing a portfolio of programs to serve them. It is important to go beyond availability and functional interests, and match each student with ideally-suited mentees. For example, senior/seasoned executives may not be the best match for new students who have not yet developed the background to benefit from the wisdom they might receive. A young alum from a similar socio-cultural background may prove to be a better fit. Meanwhile, a mentor with a different background can expose more advanced students to valuable diverse perspectives. The duration and intensity of the programs can also vary and change along with the evolving needs of the students. Thus, mentorships programs should be customized and vary in nature; (e.g., one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring, professionals vs. peer mentors, and use of hybrid methods based on the needs of the student cohorts). Select examples of signature mentoring programs are as follows:

### **Global Mentorship Programme (GMP) [Nottingham University Business School in Ningbo, China]**

In this dual mentorship model, each student is assigned an industry mentor as well as an alum, ideally a previous participant of the GMP. The students take a survey as they join the program which enables GMP to make better matches. Program tutors oversee the mentoring relationship but typically do not intervene or mediate.

The mentors have international backgrounds, hailing from 20 countries and organizations such as Accenture, Apple, BASF, Cargill, Samsonite, and the UN. They are matched with 1-2 students each. Once students meet with their executive mentors, they form groups of 5-6 students and are then coached by peer mentors to ensure that students utilize the resources available and make the best of the experience.

In the third and final stage of the program, students complete two assignments on career development, an online presentation that is evaluated by global mentors, and a poster presentation evaluated by industry and peer mentors. The students are provided developmental feedback for both and receive a grade based on their individual reflections (20%) and groups work

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(80%). Over 400 students have been mentored through this program during its first five years. Notably, the program is student-driven. Students must take initiative and apply to join this selective program.<sup>15</sup>

### **Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management Virtual Mentorship Program**

Like everyone else, Kellogg was forced to move its mentoring efforts online in 2020. The school channeled the increased altruism and availability of its alumni due to remote work to grow the program. The students in the program receive three suggested matches, and either reach out to one of the recommended mentors or can conduct their own database search to identify other matches. The mentor-mentee pairs are encouraged to focus on a specific issue over the next 12 weeks. Thus, a student could engage with as many as four mentors per year.<sup>16,17</sup>

### **Anti-Racism Challenge at the University of California, Davis**

UC Davis, Graduate School of Management's 21-Week Anti Racism Challenge has already been commended by the AACSB. The school invited participants to complete a curriculum of 21 activities designed by diversity scholar Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. involving readings, videos, and recordings over 21 weeks. The topics covered structures of power, position, privilege, perception, and process.<sup>18,19</sup>

### **Signature Mentoring Programs at Rutgers Business School (RBS)**

Students at RBS have opportunities to participate in several mentoring programs. They can match and engage with an alum as well as a peer mentor (a senior student) in their first year. As they progress in their studies, they can also apply and become part of one of the signature mentoring programs such as TeamUP, Women BUILD, Group Mentoring for first generation college students and other student populations, Helpful Executives in Reach, and Road to Success Programs (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, CPA and Consulting). All of these programs are offered in addition to the mentoring offered by our faculty, and a dedicated Office of Career Management and supplemented by 24/7 online tutoring support.

**RBS B-STAR:** Launched in 2013, RBS B-STAR, is a credit-bearing, multi-year student tracking and engagement program that supports high-potential first-year minority students admitted to RBS. It is part of the RBS diversity programs portfolio (The Office of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA) | Rutgers Business School), which includes a menu of programs and initiatives that engage students from middle school, high school, college, and

later as alumni. RBS B-STAR is one of the most comprehensive programs serving underrepresented minority populations. It allows students to take full advantage of early exposure to campus life, thereby providing essential social capital that helps ease the complex and intimidating transition between high school and college.

The first tier of the program includes an intensive, six-week, hands-on academic agenda in which selected incoming first-year students have an opportunity to live on campus and take two college courses for full academic credit. The second tier of the program consists of multi-year follow-up and engagement with the RBS B-STARs. Program participants are provided various support services, resources, and opportunities designed to develop leadership abilities as they work toward the completion of an undergraduate business degree.

Academic components of the program include developmental courses, workshops, labs and groups activities, and help strengthen students' cognitive capabilities, motivation, determination, and general preparedness for college coursework. Social components include enrichment activities, team-building projects, daily group study, and social-oriented workshops. In addition to earning college credits prior to the start of the fall semester, the small cohort experience offers great benefit to the students.<sup>20</sup>

***Women BUILD (Business Undergraduates in Leadership Development):*** A three-year-long leadership program, Women BUILD is designed to provide high-achieving, motivated and talented women undergraduates the opportunity to reach their full leadership potential as business students and empower them to work toward their future as the next generation of female business leaders committed to excellence in business, ethical judgment, and global perspective. The program works in conjunction with major corporations that support the efforts made. Students can regularly engage with corporate sponsors and senior women executives with sustained connections to the school.

### **Teaching Data Science for Business Students**

Business schools have been at the forefront of pedagogical innovations. The fundamental aim of business schools is to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to succeed in a dynamic and complex business world. From virtual classrooms to video interviews to case studies to flipped classrooms, business schools have been bringing positive change to education, to better prepare their students. For example, business schools have used gamification techniques, such as simulations and games, to enhance student engagement and promote active learning. A prototypical

example was the beer distribution game (also known as the beer game), invented by Jay W. Forrester at the MIT's Sloan School of Management in 1960, which exposed students to supply chains and incomplete information, as well as the bullwhip effect in an easy, simply to grasp manner. Similar strategies have been used in many other domains to go beyond traditional classroom education, with modern business instruction relying heavily on experiential learning.

Data science, in particular, requires experiential learning on steroids. The pedagogy of data science requires imparting both theoretical understanding and practical skills. Much more so than other subjects, the pedagogy of data science emphasizes a learner-centered collaborative approach, where learners are encouraged to take an active role in their own learning while collaborating with others to understand different facets of any analytical task. This involves promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and encouraging learners to ask questions, seek feedback, and collaborate with others.

Furthermore, data science is well adapted to experiential learning. It has a wide range of applications in business, including the use of predictive analytics to help businesses predict future trends and outcomes based on historical data, customer segmentation for tailored marketing and sales, fraud detection, supply chain optimization, and risk management, among others. This rich set of applications lends itself to a diverse set of case studies.

A case study approach to teaching data science typically involves using real-world business cases or problems as a basis for teaching data science concepts, techniques, and tools. The case study may involve data from a variety of sources, such as financial statements, sales data, or social media activity. Students are then asked to apply data science concepts and techniques to analyze the data and develop insights or recommendations that can help address the business problem or question. This is the approach that has been followed at leading business schools. For example, HBS, Stanford GSB, MIT Sloan, and Columbia Business School all offer courses at different levels that use case studies to teach data science. The HBS "Data Science for Business" course covers topics such as data wrangling, visualization, regression, and time series forecasting with case studies from Fannie Mae, Carvana, and others. The executive education program at the Stanford Graduate School of Business offers a program on "Big Data, Strategic Decisions: Analysis to Action" which includes team-based data simulation projects and case studies from Netflix and Coursera among others. At MIT Sloan, courses such as "Data, Models, and Decisions" and "Data Mining: Finding the Models and Predictions that Create Value" covers topics such as

probability, regression, classification, fraud detection, and optimization using case studies from sources such as Airbnb, Amazon, and Uber.

The case study approach can be effective in teaching data science because it provides students with a realistic and relevant context for learning. By working on real-world business cases, students can see how data science can be applied to solve practical problems, and they can develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are directly applicable to their future careers. In addition, the case study approach can help students develop important professional skills, such as effective communication, teamwork, and project management. Working on a case study often requires collaboration with others and the ability to present findings and recommendations in a clear and persuasive manner. Overall, the case study approach to data science is a powerful tool for teaching students how to apply data science concepts and techniques to real-world business problems, while also developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and professional skills.

At RBS, along with case studies, we regularly integrate DataCamp Classrooms into our data science courses. DataCamp is an online learning platform that focuses on teaching students the comprehensive skills they need to become successful data scientists, and enables guided practical application of theoretical concepts. We also encourage collaborative learning through semester long group projects and capstone projects that are focused on real situations where students need to understand the business problem, develop transformative solutions collaboratively and presenting them persuasively to their peers.

Another more proactive solution to promote student engagement and active learning, also utilized at RBS, is to use gamification. Gamification is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, for example, to conduct research (Foldit, EyeWire), to communicate (Budget Hero), to encourage better behaviors (Green Quest), and to educate (Beer Game). We have already mentioned the Beer Game. Foldit (developed at the University of Washington) allows players to contribute to scientific research by folding proteins. Discoveries made in the game are published in peer-reviewed research journals with Foldit players being credited for their contributions. For example, gamers helped solve the structure of an enzyme that was critical for reproduction of the AIDS virus. EyeWire (developed at MIT) allows players to map the human brain by tracing the neural connections in images of brain tissue, and thus advances neuroscience research. Budget Hero (developed by American Public Media) allows players to experience the challenges of balancing the US federal budget, and thus helps people understand the complexities of the US federal budget process.

Gamification is well suited to and can be actively used in teaching data science. One of the most common ways to do this is to utilize Kaggle Competitions. Kaggle is a platform where data scientists can compete in online challenges to solve real-world problems. Instructors can ask students to join an existing competition (both currently active or one that is completed) or can even create Kaggle competitions for their students, providing them with a fun and engaging way to apply data science concepts to practical challenges. Active real-world competitions provide both a sense of urgency and a clear motivation to students to apply theoretical concepts learned in class to real life business situations.

Code Challenges can provide a lightweight version of this. Here, instructors can create coding challenges that use gamification elements, such as badges, points, and leaderboards, to motivate and engage students. For example, an instructor might create a coding challenge that asks students to develop a machine learning model that achieves a certain level of accuracy or precision. Alternatively, the instructor may award badges based on fairness of the developed model. For courses that cover topics such as Data Visualization, specific Data Visualization Competitions can be run, where students are tasked with creating compelling and informative data visualizations, as well as web dashboards. These competitions can use modern analytics and visualization tools such as Tableau, and can encourage students to use their creativity and design skills to communicate complex data insights, which is particularly useful for MBA students who seek to apply data science techniques to domain specific problems.

Data Science Games provide a ready-made way to communicate advanced concepts to students. There are a variety of online games and simulations that teach data science concepts, such as “Data Dealer” and “Data Detectives”. Data Dealer (developed by a team based in Austria) simulates the data brokerage industry, allowing players to manage a company that collects, analyzes, and sells personal data to advertisers, governments, and other clients. This is an online game, where players are shown different data sources (such as social media profiles, web browsing history, and purchasing behavior), and can then create detailed profiles of individuals, which can then be sold to clients. Here, students learn to think critically about the trade-offs involved in data collection and use, and in particular, consider ethical questions about privacy, consent, and the use of personal data for commercial purposes.

Another example of data science and artificial intelligence concepts being taught through games are extensions of Minecraft. Minecraft is widely considered to be one of the greatest video games ever made and has over 100 million active users. Minecraft Education Edition enables the use of the

Minecraft platform to teach students. In particular, the Education Edition has several games that allow the teaching of probability and statistics, as well as data gathering and visualization skills. Newer frameworks (such as MineDojo) even allow advanced skills such as embodied agent research.

A final hypothetical (and extreme) example of gamification is through the use of escape rooms.<sup>21</sup> Data science escape rooms could provide a fun and challenging way for students to apply their data science skills. For example, an instructor might create an escape room where students must use data analysis and visualization skills to solve puzzles and escape the room. While as of now, we are not aware of any business schools directly using this for data science, such concepts are being explored, at least in a virtual sense for data science.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, gamification can provide a fun and engaging way for students to learn and practice data science skills, while also promoting teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving. The future of data science education is clearly more experiential and collaborative.

### Conclusion

The post-pandemic era presents both challenges and opportunities for business schools to improve the student experience. The shift to remote learning has forced many schools to rethink their traditional models of education and adopt new technologies and pedagogical methods. While this has created challenges, it has also opened up new possibilities for more flexible and personalized learning experiences.

To improve the student experience, business schools must prioritize student engagement, support, and inclusion. This can be achieved through a range of initiatives, including mentorship programs, internships, networking opportunities, and student clubs and organizations. Additionally, schools must invest in the latest technologies and tools to facilitate remote cross-functional learning and provide students with the resources they need to succeed.

Ultimately, the success of any business school depends on its ability to prepare students for the rapidly evolving demands of the business world. By improving the student experience, business schools can ensure that their graduates are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and networks they need to thrive in the post-pandemic era.

### Authors

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