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Paul Brothers
Business Reference Librarian
Angelo Bruno Business Library
University of Alabama

Business Research Academy: Academic Business Librarians Gaining STEAM

In the Fall of 2014, the business librarians at the University of Alabama (UA) embarked on an outreach opportunity to work with a select group of 300 elite students (with a minimum GPA of 3.5 and ACT score of 28) who are admitted each year from the Science, Technology, Engineering (and now Arts) and Math programs on campus. These students apply in their junior year, and if admitted, will earn an MBA with only one additional year of classes, rather than the traditional two years of post-undergraduate work.

This unique business information instruction program is called the Business Research Academy. The Academy has been very successful in its first years of activity. Lee Pike (retired), former Head of Bruno Business Library, is the original initiator of this specialized program at UA. He is quick to point out that the idea was born out of a similar program at Emory University. My colleagues Karen Chapman, Mark Siciliano, and I spent considerable time in getting a full suite of courses built and stored in the online course management system. Of course, we continue to adjust and update the content on a regular basis.

The [STEM Path to the MBA](#) is administratively housed within the UA Culverhouse College of Commerce. The head of the program is the Executive Director for Innovation Initiatives and is a faculty member in the Marketing Department. With the full suite of classes assembled, we are now working with approximately 900 students and are responsible for 1) **instructing** in various business resources, 2) **assessing**, 3) **relating** with students and, last but not least, 4) **liaising** with the associated faculty.

Instruction is the most labor intensive part of this program, even though we are leveraging technology to work with economies of scale in our approach. We use instructional design tools for video capture and editing, interactive web page/database presentation technologies, and static HTML pages, with some level of storyboarding in certain classes--all incorporated into the course management system--to make the content more appealing and accessible for these students, who may never walk into the brick and mortar business library. Materials are custom-tailored to the particular business subject being covered that semester: freshmen cover leadership & organizations and marketing; sophomores study accounting and finance; and juniors

focus on operations management and global business. (Seniors are assigned business projects and our work with them is relegated to serving, when called upon, as a source of business reference.) Doing conventional face-to-face instruction sessions for the cohorts (with five STEM instructors covering approximately 35 sections per semester) would be Herculean, to say the least, for our two business instruction librarians, Mark Siciliano and myself.

Assessing the work of these students and getting their feedback for our part in the Academy has been crucial to the success of this whole venture. After we do a brief in-class presentation reminder at the beginning of each semester for each class and section, we explain that a 20-question quiz assessment is available and due in six weeks, from that point; this quiz is worth 5% of their course grade. We have done end-of-course feedback surveys using some open-ended and Likert-scale questions to gauge the students' overall opinion of the Academy and offer us opportunities to adjust the program as needed. Karen Chapman has done the major share of the technical work of crafting surveys, loading classes into the course shells, loading and administering the quizzes and compiling the content into a cohesive format for display via the technology platform.

Relating to the students takes shape in several ways. We try to use content that is pertinent to the curriculum, technological media that is well-received by our audience, and delivery methods that are, hopefully, appreciated by their sophisticated (i.e., critical) taste.

Liaising with the faculty has come in the form of collaborating with the STEM Path to the MBA faculty and organizing the Academy content. One recent innovation of the Academy is our planning and conducting an in-class business plan workshop for the juniors in their fall semester "Operations Management" class. Part of the rationale for this business plan workshop has to do with the relatively small amount of readily available and applicable content, in the form of databases and such, we have to offer students for this particular semester. We decided that developing a business plan workshop seemed like a logical and pragmatic thing to do for the students, and it nicely incorporated the previous semesters' classes for a practical project. The hands-on, experiential workshop was well-received by the students.

In conclusion, the Business Research Academy continues to be an excellent outreach activity and a spectacular opportunity to leverage the resources of the Bruno Business Library to support the Business School and the associated STEAM constituencies, too. If your school has a STEM Path to MBA program, I encourage your business library to explore the possibilities of replicating the work we are doing here at UA within this unique program. Please contact me for follow-up information. In no time, your business library can be gaining STEAM, too.