

DELIVERING REALITY: WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Keltgen-Pierson, Jaciel
Augustana College
jkeltgen@wise.augie.edu

Oppegard, Anne
Augustana College
oppegard@wise.augie.edu

ABSTRACT

Challenges included breaking out of the hold to design a course that drew heavily upon the stories and experiences of female community leaders. A second challenge was to foster connections between student participants and the invited speakers. Chief among the success of the class was the students' reaction to and appreciation of the stories. Students developed a sense of self-awareness and expanded their view of self beyond the immediate "student self" to the view of self as professional women engaging in career development.

COURSE DESIGN AND OUTCOME OBJECTIVES

The course was offered as a "general" elective and was open to all majors; gender was not an exclusionary factor. Due to room constraints, the class size was 50; 45 women and 2 men enrolled. Nearly half of the students were sophomores; juniors and seniors were equally represented in class's student body. The students represented 14 different majors; 48% were Business Administration majors. The primary goal for the course was to offer to young women the opportunity to listen to and benefit from the insights offered by women in the business world. The course moved beyond the boundaries provided by a traditional text setting and expanded the definition of "business world" so that the challenges and pitfalls of a woman's professional career could be identified and assessed. Through this assessment, the students identified successful strategies of others and developed their own strategies to foster success.

The course requirements included the submission of a weekly reflection journal to the faculty. Students were encouraged to make entries to these journals on a daily basis so that the impacts of the stories they heard could be captured, reflected upon, and preserved. Students gleaned references to women in the popular press through the daily activity of "news d'jour." The various facets of news items were discussed: the women in the stories; how the women were portrayed; and students' reactions to these articles which ranged from President Bush's cabinet appointments to Mrs. Bush's inaugural gown to the cross-Antarctic trek of American Ann Bancroft and Norwegian Liv Arneson. Additionally, students were required to interview exceptional businesswomen. Students selected from categories such as from "intergenerational businesses," "women in sports," "role reversal," and "career hiatus" and in many cases, interviewed women in areas of interest to the students. Students prepared a written report of this interview and made brief in-class presentations of their interviews. This activity was designed to help students build a network of mentors and role models.

"The Eleven Commandments of Wildly Successful Women" (Gilberd) was chosen to provide the textual context for the course. Through the use of qualitative research techniques, the work presents the stories of women who have overcome obstacles to construct their own definitions of success. The themes that emerged from 125 interviews became the foundation for the commandments. For this course each invited speaker was provided a copy of a chapter from the book in advance to their visit to the classroom. The chapter material and its foundational "commandment" provided a springboard for the guests' presentations. The following three examples illustrate the correlation between text and speaker; samples of student reaction are also provided as evidence of the effectiveness and impact of the pedagogical approach (text and speaker) employed in the course.

Commandment 9, "See Mistakes as Road Signs, Not Road Blocks" provided a venue in which students heard from a young woman who had, in her thirty-some years of life, achieved a high level of

success in a medical occupation, undergone chemical dependency treatment, and now holds a management-level-position in the mass-media industry. Her story, while riveting in its intensity and highly personal nature, also made clear that “failure” does not consign one to a life without satisfaction or fulfillment. From a student reflection journal: “In my mind she is more of a success today than she was before, because she was engulfed by the ideas and preconceived notions of what was going to make her happy and feel successful. Finding her true passion and peace makes me believe that I will be able to do the same.”

Two women, one an attorney and the other a judge, personified Commandment 2 “Take Responsibility for Your Career”. Friends for many years, these co-speakers told of putting husbands and children first; of ‘surviving’ in positions that did not challenge or fulfill; and of returning to law school later in life. Both spoke frankly about career paths dictated by others as well as the paths constructed through self-design. Although the women are nearing retirement, the students related to their stories and found much of immediate value and interest. From a student journal: “I was utterly impressed with X and Y. I felt they were both such poised, well-spoken and incredible individuals. I was especially struck by the differences in their personalities. They both seemed very successful in their careers and personal lives and followed similar paths. However, X seemed more soft-spoken and internal, while Y was far more talkative and outgoing. Despite this they both succeeded in the field of law. I felt their common trait was their self-driven attitude and hard-working values. They were both true pioneers for women in law, and I cannot imagine what they faced. Listening to them I was thinking, all of us in this room are truly indebted to these two women and their entire generation.”

A physician addressed Commandment 7, “When Someone says You Can’t, Say Watch me!” Of the more than twenty-five guest speakers who graced our classroom, this speaker enthralled, entertained, and visibly moved all who heard her. A tale of youthful brilliance and undergraduate successes at an Ivy League school evolved into one of struggle, challenge, and for the first time, failure. With great good humor and amazing honesty, she told of how she strategized ways to overcome adversity and establish her practice. To a one, the class participants, student and faculty alike, were mesmerized by the strength of character and self-awareness exhibited by the speaker. A student wrote: “Finishing the week with [Dr. X] refueled me in a way. I had been conversing with one of the other members of our class about the need to hear about failure in life. At times it was beginning to feel like everyone just had an outstanding story of success, that in order to be successful you could never fail. Granted, each speaker has highlighted adversity, but hearing [Dr. X] talk about [her nearly-career-ending difficulties] was a fresh breath. Knowing that you can overcome those obstacles and still be a successful individual is inspiring. Of course I know that we all will make mistakes and have to learn from them along the way, but people aren't always willing to share those mistakes and learned lessons.”

Two additional goals of the course were to offer students mentoring and networking opportunities. Speakers became defacto network links and several have become informal mentors; some now employ students from the course. To offer a balance of ‘mature’ perspective with that of women just beginning careers, recent female alumni were invited to participate a panel discussion regarding issues facing those new to the job field. These young women (who we fondly dubbed “newbies”) shared advice on topics ranging from dressing for success to balancing post-college life and career. Students in the course were comfortable in asking questions of the panel both during the presentation and during a post-panel lunch.

Another goal of the course was to help students expand their definition of “business” beyond commerce. To that end, several guests from outside the traditional business arena were invited to address the class. In addition to members of the medical and legal professions, other presenters included a local TV anchorwoman, the director of a nonprofit social welfare organization, an academician and an TV personality. Two ‘remote’ guests – an entertainment personality and an academician –joined the class for conversations via telephone. One of Augustana’s most visible alumni, Mary Hart of Entertainment Tonight addressed the balance necessary in her life, and of the value of the undergraduate preparation the students are receiving. Prior to her ‘visit’ the students watched the Biography episode featuring Mary’s life and career. Despite the miles separating her from the class, she, like the other guest speakers, shared stories of success and challenge. Initially, students seemed shy and reluctant to pose questions, but Mary’s honesty and engaging style soon elicited dialogue comparable to what had transpired with local guests. Dr. Katherine Haley Will, President of Whittier College and former Augustana College faculty member also visited the course via conference call. Dr. Will spoke of her career progression from faculty to president and the importance of the mentoring she received along the way. She also discussed the necessity of coordinating family responsibilities with career developments. The students were interested to learn about

the balance necessary for dual academic careers and how the maturation of the family's children facilitated the pursuit of a high-level administrative position.

STUDENT REACTION AND ASSESSMENT

At the conclusion of the course, students completed an assessment tool which designed to measure (1) student perception of the course, (2) student reaction to certain qualitative characteristics of the course, and (3) student evaluation of guest speakers. The results of sections one and two of the instrument are summarized in Table 1. Student feedback on the guest speakers was evaluated in rank-order; Dr. X, referred to earlier, received a ranking of 5, with "5" being "Definitely invite to return."

Table 1

Data summarized from evaluation instruments bears out the value of this course for students. Of the perception items, "Overall value derived from course" received a 4.6 out of 5 ranking with 28 of 41 respondents (68%) assigning a value of 5. The evaluation also gives support to the value of the news d'jour and interview components. These items received average rankings of 4.1 and 4.0 respectively.

Major course objectives were met as evidenced by data from the evaluation. Thirty-three students (79% of those completing the instrument) gave the highest ranking to "listening to the experiences of others and drawing benefit from their sharing." Another objective of the course was to provide young women with the opportunity to meet potential mentors. The evaluation indicates that we achieved this objective; 26 students (62%) scored this objective with the highest ranking possible. Although not an articulated objective, we were gratified to learn that 79% of the students would "definitely" recommend this course to other women. Regarding the gender imbalance of the students enrolled, our objective was not to be "inclusive" as much as it was to be "non-exclusive." Even though only 17 students said they would "definitely" recommend this course to a man, we found the two men enrolled in the course to be constant, although somewhat reserved, participants in the class. In his final reflection journal, one young man, the son of local business owners and a business major, wrote, "I have now been alive for 258 months. Out of all those months, I would say that there are about a dozen that I could recall what I was doing. I am telling you this because this last month was one that had a profound effect on me. That is, I will always remember Women in Business as one of the most interesting, influential, and memorable classes that I took part in at Augustana. This is not just because I was one of two guys!!!"

Focus group . . .

If you would have told me last year that next January I would be taking a Women in Business class, I would have never believed you. Now, I sure am glad that my road took that turn. I have learned so much about life, the other gender, and myself that I have named this my most productive January ever. Thank you so much for taking the time to organize this class. It was grrrrreat!

REVISION FOR FUTURE OFFERINGS

- Shadowing
- Case studies
- Concluding day
- Conclusion
- One year later – still getting feedback
- Demand for course]
- Evidence of continuing value for students.

REFERENCES

Gilberd, P. B. (1996) *The Eleven Commandments of Wildly Successful Women*. New York: Macmillan Spectrum.

At the conclusion of the course, students completed an assessment tool which designed to measure (1) student perception of the course, (2) student reaction to certain qualitative characteristics of the course, and (3) student evaluation of guest speakers. The results of sections one and two of the instrument are summarized in Table 1. Student feedback on the guest speakers was evaluated in rank-order; Dr. X, referred to earlier, received a ranking of 5, with "5" being "Definitely invite to return."