

Gateway to Business: An Innovative Approach to Enhancing the

First-Year Experience for Business Students

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Keywords: First-year courses, freshmen courses, critical-thinking, management, business, Writing-across-the-curriculum, transition to college, college retention

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# Gateway to Business: An Innovative Approach to Enhancing the First-Year Experience for Business Students

## ABSTRACT

The “Gateway to Business” course for first-year business students was designed to help students acquire the skills necessary to succeed in business school, and, ultimately as professionals by integrating the learning of business concepts with the development of business skills. Additional objectives include easing students’ transition from high school to college, providing first-year students with a sense of community, and offering mentoring support from both faculty and peers. This paper will provide a description of the course and how it was implemented using a team-teaching approach. Data assessing the course’s efficacy in meeting its objectives will also be provided.

## INTRODUCTION

Today’s business faculty and administrators are struggling with the demands to better educate university students in the areas of learning and professional skill development. Designing and improving courses in higher education has been a topic of discussion for some time, yet we seldom see truly influential or innovative changes in course design (Diamond, 1989). Ironically, the first year of university study, in many ways is the most formative and is often the least satisfactory in terms of concept, curriculum, and pedagogy. Many universities find, to their great distress, that too many students spend time in the first year in remediation programs. Introductory courses often repeat subject matter that freshman have studied for years rather than introducing new subjects that broaden horizons and give students a sense of the adventure of learning. Too often the first-year curriculum is a bore and freshman instruction inadequate. As a result, freshman—the students who need the very best teaching—may actually receive the worst, and more of them fall away by the end of the freshman year than at any other time (The Boyer Commission Report, 1995).

Gateway to Business was developed in response to calls for reform in the first-year curriculum, and to calls from advocates for radical reform in business education (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). Critics of business education point out that new skills are required for managing diversity, globalization, downsizing and restructuring; skills that are lacking in today’s graduates (Mason, 1992). There is little question that there is a call to reconfigure the first-year experience to bring together the teaching of discipline based concepts in harmony with developing students’ specific business skills in order to prepare them to meet the challenges of today’s global managers.

The “Gateway to Business” course for first-year business students was designed to help students acquire the skills necessary to succeed in business school, and, ultimately as professionals by integrating the learning of business concepts with the development of business skills. This paper will review the relevant literature pertaining to first-year courses and business pedagogy, present the Gateway to Business course design model,

describe the course implementation, method of instruction, assignments and exercises, and present evidence that the course is meeting its objectives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Reforms in higher education are appearing in the new guidelines that are being developed for “general education” curriculums across the country. Most students take a number of general education courses designed, at least in theory, to complement and supplement their business courses. The faculty teaching these courses draw on their unique expertise, which is generally far removed, from any kind of a business orientation. Additionally, the liberal arts content and pedagogy seldom involve development of learning and professional skills (Boyer, 1997). Unfortunately, this type of curriculum design, particularly in terms of the first year experience, has not provided students with the skills necessary to succeed in business school and, ultimately, as professionals. Students are left to their own devices to “bridge the gap” between the knowledge and skills gained in their general liberal arts courses and their discipline specific business courses. Sadly, many simply dismiss their general education courses as irrelevant requirements.

In order to bridge the gap between general education and the various disciplines, constituents leading education reform have suggested that skills like writing, speaking, and critical thinking be integrated across the curriculum and embedded within several discipline-based courses. Other sources have recommended the use of writing as an essential component in developing students’ thinking skills and understanding of business concepts (Dehler, 1996; Locke & Brazelton, 1997; Shaw, 1999; The Center for Critical Thinking, 1997). Proponents of writing-across-the-curriculum advocate the importance of extending instruction in writing and speaking beyond composition and speech classes (Shaw, 1999; Russell, 1991). Shaw (1999) states:

Reading, speaking, and writing are essential not only for understanding academic concepts, theories, and reasoning in the classroom, but also for applying knowledge and scientific methods of analysis to everyday life. It is unrealistic to expect students to obtain all necessary training in these skills from only one or two courses. Instruction must extend well beyond composition and speech classes: (p. 157).

The ability to lead, communicate well, manage conflict, and foster teamwork is critical for today’s managers and as Mason (1992) notes “business schools have been unable to keep pace ... Neither industry nor business schools have prepared people to meet the challenges of the global competitive environment” (p. 11). Business schools have also been criticized for omitting training in critical thinking skills that are necessary for environmental scanning for opportunities, tolerance for risk and ambiguity, learning from failure, perseverance, and the ability to function as a generalist rather than a specialist in business (Chanko & Roberts, 1996). There is a need to focus more on student learning that has an emphasis on critical thinking in the business school curriculum (Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990, Adams and Hamm, 1990, Daley, 1995).

At the same time, there is pressure on universities to be resourceful in designing a “first-year experience” that will provide a stimulating environment for intellectual growth, and the communication of information and ideas (American Association for Higher Education, 1998; Strum Kenney, 1998; The Boyer Commission Report, 1995). By re-examining the first-year experience and implementing new and innovative learning strategies, universities can help students make their transition into college easier and increase student retention rates (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985; Cuseo, 1991; Federman Stein, 1997; Barefoot, 1993; Tinto, 1993). In addition, a first-year business course that uses a hands-on, experiential approach can help students with little or no organizational experience to develop a better understanding of the connections between themselves and business (Lamb, Lee, & Vinton, 1997).

As a general education mandate, departments across our campus were asked to integrate writing intensive courses into their curriculums. At the same time, departments were asked to develop one course in each discipline that would teach critical thinking skills. The School of Business was in the process of designing a first-year course with the objective of better preparing students to meet the school’s academic challenges and expectations; therefore it made sense to incorporate writing and critical thinking into the course. Gateway to Business was developed with the objective of integrating writing and critical thinking into the business curriculum while enhancing the first-year experience for business students.

## GATEWAY TO BUSINESS MODEL

### Course Concept and Objectives

Gateway to Business utilizes a combination of delivery methods. Students attend lectures and are assigned readings as part of the traditional approach to learning. Concurrently, students participate in interactive/experiential learning activities where they can learn and apply important key concepts in several key areas including knowledge building, critical thinking, and decision-making while developing the skills that are necessary to be effective in today’s business environment. The course objectives are as follows: develop critical thinking skills in the context of learning about contemporary business issues, learn about various management concepts and business themes, provide support for students in their transition from high school to college, and develop writing, teamwork, presentation, computer, and research skills.

### Implementation/Method of Instruction

Gateway to Business is a required course for all business students and fulfills their general education critical thinking, and lower-division, discipline-related writing requirements. The course does not take the place of the traditional freshman English composition course, but rather, is intended to introduce students to discipline specific writing styles and applications. Students must also take an English composition course as part of their general education requirements.

The course includes one fifty-five minute lecture and two fifty-five minute recitation meetings per week. The lectures are attended by 150-200 freshmen that have declared their majors to be in the field of business. A business faculty member, or another appropriate professional familiar with the designated topic, presents the main lecture, panel, or discussion topic during the weekly lecture. The following topics are introduced during the weekly lecture sessions and supplemented with experiential material during the recitation sessions: group processes, critical thinking and problem solving, research skills, stress and time management skills, contemporary business issues, and business communications skills. The first year that the course was implemented, students met twice a week for an hour and twenty-minute lecture and an hour and twenty-minute recitation session. However, after analyzing feedback from the course assessment, it was determined that the lecture session was too long in length to hold students' attention and that they might benefit from more hands-on activity that could be handled in an additional recitation meeting.

The recitation sessions meet twice a week and are attended by 20-30 students per section. Each recitation section is facilitated by a section instructor (business faculty member) who is responsible for teaching and implementing assignments and experiential activities in the areas of critical thinking, writing, and team-work as they relate to the business context. School of Business faculty teach the course on a rotating basis and come from a variety of business disciplines. Past instructors have included both tenured and non-tenured faculty from the marketing, human resource management, accounting, organizational behavior, and operations management disciplines. Instructors are assisted in each section by two undergraduate teaching assistants. Miller (1991) advocates the use of teaching assistants as peer coaches and mentors, and to add to the administrative efficiency of the course. We have found that by using teaching assistants we can increase the number of opportunities students have to write and be evaluated on their writing throughout the semester. The teaching assistants grade some of the homework assignments, take attendance, and act as mentors to the Gateway to Business students. Teaching assistants receive three hours in course credit for their efforts and are also required to attend leadership development training and write a paper about their experience. Gateway teaching assistants play a crucial role in the delivery of the course in that they relieve much of the logistical burden of the course. While the School of Business has primarily a teaching mission, business faculty members also have a research expectation. Without the help of the teaching assistants, Gateway to Business faculty would not be able to meet the time demands of the course while at the same time maintaining their active involvement in research.

The delivery of the course is overseen by a course coordinator (a business faculty member) who coordinates the activities of the recitation instructors and teaching assistants, plans the content of the lecture sections, and schedules guest lecturers. The course coordinator also meets with the recitation instructors and teaching assistants on a weekly basis to share ideas, answer questions, and discuss concerns relating to the delivery of the course. Developers of team-taught business courses advocate the use of weekly meetings among faculty (Lamb, Lee, & Vinton, 1997; Miller, 1991). We have found weekly meetings to be a crucial component of the course in that they help to ensure

the consistency in grading and course content that is especially important with a team-taught course. Instructors and teaching assistants are also familiarized with the course's writing assignments and trained to use the assignment grading rubrics during the weekly meetings. An instructor's manual is provided to Gateway instructors and includes recitation ideas, suggested exercises, assignment descriptions, and grading rubrics. The manual is intended for use with a book that was written specifically for the Gateway course.<sup>1</sup>

### Topics, Assignments, and Exercises

Figure one (below) depicts the topics, assignments, and exercises used in Gateway to Business to meet the course's objectives.

(Place Figure One approximately here)

### Teamwork

With the trend in recent years for business decisions to be made by work teams rather than by individuals, many instructors have incorporated team learning into their classes. While the use of classroom teams has increased and group projects are many, few instructors have focused attention on improving the functioning of classroom teams (Cox & Bobrowski, 2000).

Among the problems experienced by student teams are the following: poorly defined goals and expectations, social loafing, mismanaged conflict, team member dissatisfaction, and poor communication. Used correctly, teams can increase productivity, raise morale, and in some cases encourage innovation (Dumaine, 1994, p. 87). The trick, then, is for instructors to not only expose students to teamwork but also to provide guidance and instruction in effective team management. The team charter assignment (Cox & Bobrowski, 2000), the team industry report, and intensive weekend leadership training are used in Gateway to Business as vehicles for increasing classroom team effectiveness.

Research on teams indicates that teams need a variety of support and structural mechanisms in order to be successful, including explicit ground rules and set behavioral expectations (Walker & Martin, 1998; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Establishing ground rules can help to prevent social loafing and free-riding behaviors by providing assurances that free-riding attempts will be dealt with (Shepperd, 1993).

Setting ground rules at the outset of team formation may be critical to team effectiveness. Research by Gersick (1988) suggests that a group's first meeting may set lasting precedents for how the group will use its time. Feldman (1984) calls this phenomenon

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Bobrowski, P.E. & Cox, P.L. (2001). *Gateway to Business* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). Corvallis, Oregon: Pacific Crest.

“primacy” and states: “The first behavior pattern that emerges in a group often sets group expectations” (p. 51). While group norms usually develop gradually and informally as group members learn what behaviors increase group effectiveness, it is also possible to short-cut the process by conscious group decision (Hackman, 1976).

The primary objective of the team charter assignment is to “jump start” the development of group norms and to increase the likelihood that the first group behavior patterns that develop will aid rather than hinder team performance. The first week of the semester students are organized into teams based on students’ reported strengths and weaknesses in areas such as writing, public speaking, computer literacy, leadership, and creativity. The goal of the instructor is to combine teams with members with complementary abilities and skills. These five-member student teams work together throughout the semester and are assigned a semester-long project involving an extensive analysis of an industry.

Each Gateway to Business team drafts its own charter as a formal agreement among members documenting responsibilities and expectations. The team charter, along with peer reviews of team performance, helps to insure the equitable contribution of team members and establishes clear instructions for carrying out the team project—an industry research report. The industry report is assigned as a team project in order to develop student collaborative skills and expose students to the collaborative nature of business. Team efforts culminate in a single research report that embodies the blended work of all the members.

Teamwork skills are further developed through student participation in a three-hour weekend intensive training course that was developed in collaboration with the Athletic Department and Counseling Center. An increasing number of companies are using experiential courses to build teamwork, leadership, and management skills in their employees (Priest, 1991; Wagner, Baldwin, & Roland, 1991; Wagner & Roland, 1992; Mendel, 1993; Wagner, 1995). In addition to the large number of companies embracing outdoor experiential training, universities are also integrating this training into their curricula (Glass, 1987; Kerr & Gass, 1987; Neumann, 1989; O’Keefe, 1989; Fullerton & Davis, 1996; Gilbert, Camp, Cole, Bruce, Fielding, & Stanton, 2000; Marotta, Peters, & Paliokas, 2000).

This type of training is known by many names—experience-based training and development, outdoor management development, adventure training, etc.—but essentially involves employee or student participation in training activities such as group initiatives, high ropes courses, socialization games, and other experiential activities. Proponents of the programs claim the training can enhance team cohesiveness and individual confidence (Mendel, 1993), improve communications (Management Today, 1998), and boost productivity (Babson, 2000).

At the beginning of the sixth week of the semester, teams attend an intensive three-hour teambuilding/leadership training course. During this time they are given several intensive activities that can only be accomplished through teamwork. Activities have included a

competitive team treasure hunt, a large group jump-roping exercise, a group lifesaving exercise, and other experiential activities. Qualified trainers discuss various aspects of leadership and team building at the end of the training and also conduct debriefing sessions after each exercise to point out the important key learning concepts.

### Critical Thinking

The developing of critical thinking skills in the classroom has been linked to an emphasis on writing and rewriting, with rewriting stimulating students to think more deeply about what they have written (Dehler, 1996; Malekzadeh, 1998; Tsui, 1999). Writing is particularly well adapted to encourage reflection (Emig, 1977) and has been used successfully in business courses to develop student thinking (Dehler, 1996; Lamb, Lee, & Vinton; Locke & Brazelton). In her extensive study of the integration of critical thinking inside college classrooms, Tsui (1999) found that the development of critical thinking skills is linked to an emphasis on writing and rewriting, classroom discussion, and active, hands-on learning. Writing assignments should emphasize analytical writing and involve synthesis of material, evaluation of arguments, and deduction of conclusions. Rewriting should be encouraged to stimulate students to think more deeply about what they have written and utilize feedback to improve upon it. States Tsui (p. 26): "... writing is likely to exert a greater impact on student cognitive outcomes when it is stressed throughout the curriculum. ... Success in fostering critical thinking is in part contingent upon the degree to which faculty utilize writing assignments in their teaching."

Tsui also recommends that instructors rely less on lecturing and emphasize classroom discussion since students are more likely to comprehend and retain ideas when they participate in a discussion or debate on them (p. 29). Shaw (2000) recommends the development of student's reading, writing, and presentation skills as a way to stimulate critical thinking in the classroom. In developing the critical thinking component of the Gateway to Business course, attention was paid to the following four skills: evaluating evidence and arguments, recognizing errors in thinking, group decision-making, persuasion, and the application of critical thinking.

The Gateway to Business critical thinking exercises and assignments incorporate reading, writing, discussion, and oral presentation in the development of the four critical thinking skills. Most of the assignments can be found in a textbook developed by the authors for the course (see Bobrowski & Cox, 2001). Being able to critically evaluate evidence is becoming more and more important as we enter the "Information Age" with organizations increasing their ability to amass large amounts of data. Ennis (1993) lists the evaluation of evidence as a key skill necessary to students' ability to think critically. Three critical thinking assignments require students to evaluate information pertaining to a variety of business issues. The "Premature Death Exercise and Assignment" asks students to evaluate what Americans think are the causes of premature death with the actual causes of premature death. The "Time Management Assignment" requires students to keep a three-day record of how they spend their time and then evaluate the "evidence" to see if it conforms to good time management skills. Finally, the industry analysis

assignment encourages students to identify, locate, peruse, and critically evaluate available sources pertaining to a specific industry.

Students are also encouraged to critically evaluate a variety of arguments. The ability to evaluate arguments is crucial to critical thinking (Pithers & Soden, 2000; Ennis, 1993) The “Premature Death Exercise” requires students to evaluate arguments made by special interest groups for spending research dollars on various health problems. The “Government’s Role in Gambling Exercise” requires students to evaluate various arguments for and against the government taking an active role in the promotion of legalized gambling.<sup>2</sup> This exercise also encourages students to take a stance on the issue and then propose opinions as alternatives to their own opinion, a critical thinking skill described by Kuhn (1991) and Pithers and Soden (2000). The abstract writing assignment teaches students to think critically about what they have read by reading an article and abstracting the main idea, key points, and assertions that reflect the author’s view.

Three assignments require students to identify errors in thinking and decision making: the “Government’s Role in Gambling Exercise” and the “Premature Death Exercise” described above, the “College Selection Exercise” that asks students to analyze their decision-making process in evaluating and selecting a college to attend, and the *Decision Traps* book summary assignment. Students read the book *Decision Traps: The Ten Barriers to Brilliant Decision-Making and How to Overcome Them* (Russo & Schoemaker, 1990) over the course of the semester. The book summary assignment requires students to summarize what they have learned from reading the book, and then describe a “decision-trap” they have encountered in their own lives. In addition to describing the situation that lead to the decision error, students must describe how they would avoid making the same mistake in the future.

Collaborative learning is an important part of the business discourse because businesses typically use a team approach to evaluating information and making decisions; thus, group decision making assignments are an important part of the Gateway to Business critical thinking plan. The industry analysis is a team project consisting of gathering, evaluating, and analyzing information pertaining to a specific industry as a team project. In addition, each team is required to develop and present a new product idea that makes good strategic sense given what the team has learned in their industry analysis—developing application and synthesis skills. The NASA exercise is a decision-making exercise that asks students to compare the quality of group decision-making with decisions made by individual group members.

Three assignments encourage students to persuasively express their ideas (a critical thinking skill described by Pithers & Soden): the “Premature Death Exercise and Assignment”, the industry analysis paper, and the industry presentation. The “Premature Death Exercise” requires students to imagine they are managers for a major health services corporation and must present a budget to the board of trustees indicating the allocation of spending on health related issues. Students must persuade the board of

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<sup>2</sup> Source: V.R. Ruggiero, *Becoming a Critical Thinker* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.), Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, p. 56.

trustees that their allocation makes the most sense from both a business and an ethical perspective. The industry analysis and presentation requires students to communicate persuasively strategic recommendations for companies within a specific industry. In particular, students are asked to communicate convincingly a new product idea based on an analysis of industry strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

The industry assignments also require students to apply their critical thinking skills in a business context (Industry S.W.O.T. Analysis and New Product Development). As part of the time management assignment, students evaluate the way they spend their time and develop a plan for better managing their time in the future. This assignment is also intended to encourage students to apply critical thinking skills. Being able to apply one's thinking to other contexts is crucial to the full development of critical thinking skills (Cowan, 1994).

## Research

One of the Gateway recitation sessions is devoted to introducing students to the library. Students meet in the library and are introduced to the business reference center, the online catalog, and library databases. Students are assigned a "library scavenger hunt" to expose them to the location of key library resources. Having students pursue team projects in the library under the direct guidance of librarians and professors is advocated by Roth (1999) as a way of exposing students to the wealth of research sources available to them. In addition to introducing students to a variety of research materials, librarians and professors can also encourage students to evaluate the quality and appropriateness of various resources.

Another recitation session introduces students to citing sources and preparing a bibliography using APA format. Students are required to purchase *A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker<sup>3</sup> for both Gateway to Business and their English composition course. Both Gateway instructors and students have rated the book highly as an excellent resource for learning about documentation, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. Finally, "The Government's Role in Gambling" critical thinking assignment asks students to critically evaluate research sources, differentiate between fact and opinion, and locate research evidence that supports their stance on an issue.

## Contemporary Business Issues

Readings, lecture sessions, assignments, and experiential exercises are devoted to the following contemporary business issues: leadership, group processes, diversity, globalization, business ethics, and careers in business. A business professional or other knowledgeable individual facilitates the lecture session with follow-up activities, discussion, and experiential exercises provided in the recitation sessions. Whenever possible the Gateway team attempts to tie contemporary business issues to issues and topics related to the students' academic experience. For example, in addition to exploring the topic of managing diversity in organizations, students are asked to explore and

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<sup>3</sup> D. Hacker (1999). *A writer's reference* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin's.

discuss the diversity within the School of Business and their Gateway teams. Business ethics ties in with a discussion of academic integrity and ethical issues across campus. The lecture session on globalization provides an opportunity to introduce students to the International Education department and opportunities for study abroad. The session on careers in business is supplemented with exposure to internship opportunities offered by the college's Experience-based Education department. Teamwork and leadership are discussed throughout the semester with students encouraged to apply theories of leadership and group behavior to their assigned Gateway teams.

### Computer Skills

Three recitation sessions are geared toward developing computer skills. Students attend sessions in the computer lab to learn to use PowerPoint, MSWord, and Excel. Students are required to sign up for a computer account and email during the first week of class. An "Email Game" was developed to introduce students to email as an efficient means for communicating with team members (Bobrowski & Cox, 2001). Finally, students are exposed to both the Internet and library databases as part of their research orientation session in the library.

### Business Writing

Writing is used extensively throughout the semester, taking numerous disciplinary forms and fulfilling a range of discourse purposes. Particular attention is paid, however, to three specific areas: writing to learn, learning to write, and collaborative writing. Proponents of writing-across-the-curriculum recommend two ways of using writing in the classroom and across the disciplines: writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines (McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The primary purpose of writing to learn assignments—journals, summary writing, annotation—is to use writing as a tool for learning, to have writers explain concepts or ideas to themselves, to ask questions, to make connections, to speculate, to engage in critical thinking, and problem solving (Allen & Enz, 1987; McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The Gateway to Business students are asked to submit a weekly "Personal Application Assignment", a writing to learn assignment where students summarize and reflect on lecture topics, assigned readings, and experiential activities.

Students are also involved in writing activities geared toward learning to write in the business discipline. These activities include learning to write a business abstract, researching and writing about a specific industry, and resume/portfolio development. Learning to write assignments emphasize the following discourse specific skills: summarization and abstraction; critical evaluation, analysis, and persuasion; and learning to write with the brevity and clarity that is so key to communication in today's business environment. The abstract assignment encourages students to clearly summarize material in their own words, and is not only important as an adjunct to good reading, but also because it is actually a genre in business writing. Abstract writing also teaches critical thinking skills because students are expected to carefully read an article and abstract the main idea, key points, and assertions that reflect the author's view. The industry research assignment encourages students to identify, locate, peruse, and critically evaluate

available sources. The assignment is broken down into manageable components that include an outline, bibliography, rough and final drafts, and learning to document using the APA format. Resume writing and portfolio development are activities that enable students to begin to put together the material they will eventually need to apply for internships, study abroad, and an eventual career in business. To support these activities, one of the lecture sessions is devoted to a presentation by Career Services with a follow-up recitation session devoted to resume writing. In addition to instruction in writing provided by the Gateway instructors and teaching assistants, the campus Writing Center is available for remedial help with writing.

### Oral Communication Skills

In many specialized disciplines such as business, the integration of “speaking” into the curriculum is just as important as the integration of writing. In fact, a number of colleges and universities are initiating “speaking across the university” programs that seek to blend speaking opportunities with writing assignments in ways that prepare students to communicate confidently in professional settings (Lederer & Valentine, 1999). Shaw (1999) recommends providing students with an opportunity to orally present their research as a way of enriching the classroom experience and improving the quality of written work. He contends: “For most students presentation leads to higher-quality written reports, partly because of input received during presentation and partly due to the requirements of presenting their project to an audience” (p. 155). Gateway to Business recitation sections are small in size and, thus, are ideal for promoting classroom discussion and interaction. Students are encouraged to share their ideas and much attention is paid to interacting in small groups with the instructor and/or teaching assistants. Experiential exercises further encourage students to participate. In addition, several sessions are devoted to developing effective presentation skills. Each team has an opportunity to orally present in a “professional” manner their research projects at the end of the semester. The final presentation is an important part of developing the students’ oral communication skills.

### Managing the Academic Experience

One of the goals of the course is to help students to make the transition from high school to college. In order to smoothly transition into college, students need to be provided with tools and support for managing both the academic and social aspects of school (Frost, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987; Noel, Levitz, & Salur, 1985).

The first semester of college can be a stressful one as students are often faced with challenges not encountered in high school. In order to better manage the stressors of college, one of the lecture sections is devoted to stress management techniques. The Counseling Center facilitates the session and provides follow-up activities for the recitation sessions. A time management assignment is assigned to provide students with a better understanding of how they currently spend their time and how they might use time management techniques to manage their time more effectively.

The three-hour intensive leadership training (see teamwork section) provides students with tools for improving interpersonal relationships. It is also an “out-of-class” bonding experience intended to help students become more comfortable with one another, build communication with team members, and develop a sense of community within the first-year business class.

Registration may also be experienced by students as stressful and confusing. A lecture session is devoted to negotiating the registration and academic advisement processes. This session has traditionally been one of the most highly rated lecture sessions. The session is followed by mandatory meetings with the students’ faculty advisors.

Finally, the teaching assistants play an important role in easing the transition to college. Their role is not limited to academic support; we have found that students develop close relationships with the teaching assistants and seek their help with a variety of nonacademic issues related to making a smooth transition to college.

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES

The development of an effective and responsive continuous improvement process for the Gateway to Business team has been a high priority. Continuous improvement models have proven to be an effective means of providing feedback on the efficacy of new curricula (Brownell & Chung, 2001; Hunt & Sorenson, 2001; Bound, Bounds, & Fowler, 1995). The Gateway to Business team has embraced a continuous improvement approach to assessing how well we have been able to carry out each of the course activities and the extent to which the activities should be dropped, modified, or replaced. Key to the continuous improvement approach is frequent assessment from numerous sources (a form of 360-degree feedback with students, instructors, and teaching assistants) who provide both written and oral, quantitative and qualitative feedback on a regular basis.

Continuous improvement activities include the following:

- A general assessment survey of student perceptions
- Student assessment of lecture topics and presenters
- Gateway to Business weekly team meetings
- Focus groups and weekly meetings with Gateway teaching assistants
- Pre-/Post-test instruments to assess writing and skill development

A general assessment survey is administered at the end of each semester to evaluate students’ perceptions of the course. The survey consists of 53 response items where students are asked to respond to the item on a scale of 1-5 where, a) indicates strong agreement with the statement, b) indicates somewhat agreeing with the statement, c) indicates undecided or no opinion, d) indicates somewhat disagreeing with the statement, and e) indicates strong disagreement with the statement. See Appendix A for questions included on the survey.

Students are also asked to rate each lecture session using the same scale but responding to the following items:

- I found the information provided by the lecture to be useful.
- I found the presentation to be well organized.
- I found the presentation interesting.
- I found the presenter(s) enthusiastic.
- I learned a lot from the presentation.

In addition to the student ratings of the 53 response items and lecture sessions, qualitative questions are included as part of the survey (see Appendix A). Survey data is analyzed and shared with the Gateway team as they prepare the course syllabus and activities for the following fall.

In addition, several other activities provide continuous feedback throughout the semester as to whether the course is meeting its objectives: Gateway to Business team meetings, teaching assistant focus groups and weekly meetings, and the periodic student assessment of assignments and activities. Faculty member collaboration and discussions occur during the weekly Gateway team meetings and throughout the academic year. We have tried to establish a climate where Gateway instructors, students, and teaching assistants feel free to provide constant feedback and recommendations for improving the course effectiveness. Adjustments are made to the course both over the course of the semester and as the course is revised and prepared for the following fall.

Finally, two pre-/post-test instruments have been used to test student abstract writing and skill development (see Appendix B and C). Pretest/posttest designs have been recommended as a practical approach to measuring improvement in student writing and skill development (Varner & Pomerence, 1998; Odell, 1981).

#### Abstract Writing Pre-/Post-test

At the beginning of the semester, students were given the same article from a business periodical and instructed to write an abstract of the article. This assignment provided pretest information on students' initial ability to summarize what they had read. Course instructors used a consistent method (rubric) to grade the abstracts and provide students with feedback and a score based on the following criteria: whether the abstract was written in the student's own words, emphasized main ideas and key points, accurately represented the author's view, was written clearly and concisely, and was free of grammatical errors. Following the pretest assignment, students were given instruction in abstract writing and the opportunity to write three more abstracts of business articles they had found while researching information for their team industry report. Instructors also provided students with abstract writing instruction. At the end of the semester, students were given an article from a business periodical and instructed to write a final abstract.

The purpose of this assignment was to provide “post-test” information on students’ ability to summarize what they had read. Pretest and posttest data were analyzed using a paired-comparison statistical technique. Data analysis also identified specific areas where students were weakest, and areas that showed the greatest improvement.

### Business Skills Self-Assessment

To measure student competencies in business skills, a Business Skills Self-Assessment survey was used (see Appendix C). The main purpose of the survey is to enhance students’ understanding of their strengths and weaknesses prior to beginning the course; thereby helping to make them aware of areas that they need to improve upon prior to the beginning of the course work. The survey also provides an opportunity to measure students’ perceptions of their skill level at the end of the course. In the third week of the course, before beginning any skill development exercises and before embarking upon the research project, students are asked to fill out the business skills self-assessment survey using a 7-point Likert scale. The same survey is administered again on the last day of class as a post-course survey.

### RESULTS—IS THE COURSE MEETING ITS OBJECTIVES?

The various assessment instruments discussed above have provided the Gateway to Business team with valuable information pertaining to the extent the course is meeting its objectives and ways in which the course can be improved. The results of the various course assessment activities are outlined below as they pertain to the objectives of the course.

#### Development of Critical Thinking Skills

Student critical thinking outcomes have primarily been assessed by evaluating qualitative data provided by students. After completing the Premature Death Critical Thinking Exercise, students were asked to write a short evaluation of the exercise. The following are comments from student evaluations of the exercise:

“In doing the exercise, there was a lot of critical thinking involved. The reason critical thinking is a major part of the exercise is that no matter what you choose to do, someone is not going to be happy. So as you do the exercise you have to really think about the opportunity cost of your decision. I feel that is a good assignment that allows students to begin the process of thinking critically.”

“I thought the assignment was a good way to start to use critical thinking. It gets you thinking if you should do what the majority wants you to do or what you feel is right. I also liked that the assignment allowed students to discuss their ethical and moral concerns.”

Students were asked at the end of the semester to write about what they learned from the Gateway to Business critical thinking assignments. The following student comments are representative:

“Sometimes I arrive at conclusions without thinking about the facts first. I will go with my gut instinct without thinking of the consequences. I have learned that I need to take the time to think about the issue I’m facing. I also used to rely on the most readily available information. I would take the easy way out and use whatever was convenient. Unfortunately, that can get you into trouble.”

“The critical thinking assignments better prepared me for some of the decisions I had to make in my first semester of college. I learned that I need to analyze my thinking and that when I’m analytical I’m able to make better decisions.”

The authors realize that much more work needs to be done to adequately assess student critical thinking outcomes. Future plans include developing a pre-/post-test instrument to assess critical thinking outcomes. However, the qualitative data is encouraging; students appear to perceive that their ability to think critically is improving as the result of course critical thinking exercises and assignments.

### Management Concepts and Business Themes

As a result of qualitative feedback from students, instructors, and teaching assistants, and analysis of students’ ratings of the lecture presentations and presenters, the following actions have been taken:

- Lectures that were rated poorly have either been discontinued or the Gateway to Business course coordinator has worked with presenters to improve the content and delivery of the material.
- More videos, demonstrations, and interactive discussion have been included during the lectures in order to engage the students and provide real-world examples.
- More business professionals have been asked to present material and provide real-world examples.
- Gateway lecture sessions have been shortened from one-hour and twenty-minutes to fifty-five minutes in length. The original one-hour and twenty-minute sessions resulted in student disengagement and failed to hold the students’ attention.

Students have indicated that the material provided in the course has given them a clearer idea of what business is all about, and whether a career in business is right for them. Students were asked to respond to the following statement: “The course has either reinforced my decision to become a business major or has helped me realize that business is not the right major for me.” Of the students responding to the question during the Fall 2001 semester (n=157), 52% strongly agreed with the statement and 25% somewhat agreed. These results are encouraging since one of the objectives of the course is provide students with a realistic preview of both the School of Business and a career in business.

### Transition from High School to College

At the end of the semester, students were asked to respond to the following statements pertaining to making the transition from high school to college:

- I developed an understanding of what the School of Business expects of me academically.
- I was introduced to resources that will be helpful to me throughout my college career.
- The course helped me form a close bond with other business students.
- My ability to manage the stress I experience as a student has improved.
- My ability to manage my time has improved.
- The course provided me with support in my transition from high school to college.

The percentages of students to each item on the Lickert scale are listed in the table below:

Place Table 1 approximately here

The results of the data are encouraging and suggest that the majority of the students feel the course has provided support in their management of the academic experience. A preliminary look at student retention indicates the course may be improving the rate of students in good academic standing after the first semester. While it is too early to draw conclusions from the available retention data, the preliminary numbers are encouraging.

Skill Development (Teamwork, Research, Computer, Writing, and Oral Communication)

Business Skills Self-Assessment. The Business Skills Self-Assessment Survey was administered the first semester the course was offered (see Appendix D). Both pre- and post-test surveys were completed by 151 students (out of 173 enrolled in the course). Students' perceptions of their skills changed from the beginning of the semester to the end, as would be expected. However, the changes in their perceptions are interesting in that while they believed that their skills improved in most areas, improvement was not a universal result. The results are reported in Table 2 below:

Place Table 2 approximately here

Students' perceptions of their technological skills showed the most significant improvement relative to the other three areas, particularly in the use of spreadsheets, graphing spreadsheet data, and using PowerPoint. It is likely that this represents technology with which they have had little or no prior experience. As they became proficient in use of new software and technology, their growth was self-evident. Their learning was fairly obvious, and their ability to assess this improvement was enhanced by the observable, tangible nature of these skills.

The next most significant area of growth according to the students was communications: writing, presentation, and interpersonal skills. The number and nature of their writing assignments, as well as the requirement for a professional presentation worth 10% of their final grade are likely to have been key factors in their perceived improvement. Throughout the semester, all individuals were required to submit critical thinking exercises and other writing assignments, and most teams were required to give periodic progress reports on their research projects in front of their small sections. Both of these provided opportunities for ongoing feedback from the instructors so that there was quite a bit of evaluated rehearsal prior to their final papers and presentations.

Students' perceptions of their research abilities declined by 1%. However, it was not a statistically significant change. This decrease may be related to their reported 4% decline in enjoyment of teamwork, which was significant at the .05 level. It appears that there may be a connection between the two results. Students' perceived lack of improvement in their research skills is likely attributable to the complexity, depth and scope of the semester long research project. Prior experience with research in high school is usually more defined, structured, and limited in scope as compared to college research. Student teams were involved in the completion of a semester long research project. In this particular project (Industry Report) the scope and complexity required a sustained team effort for the entire semester. Therefore, it is not surprising that they reported a decline in perceptions of their research acumen as well as their enjoyment of teamwork. This suggests that students did not become less proficient but rather gained greater insight into the high levels of performance expected of them in order to excel in a business school environment.

In fact, their perceptions of enjoyment of teamwork decreased, as discussed above, most likely because of the intensity and duration of the research project. Additionally, this may very well have been their first exposure to coursework that has been developed on the philosophy and principles of high performance teams described by Katzenbach and Smith (1997), that are critical for excellence in the real business environment.

Several changes have been made to the Gateway to Business course as a result of the information obtained from the Skills Assessment. More attention is now given to the development of team building and research skills:

- The Leadership three-hour training was developed and implemented in the second year of the course. Preliminary assessment of the training indicates it is effective in building student teamwork and leadership skills. Students appear to bond more quickly with their teams after the training. Communication with team members also seems to improve as a result of the training.
- Teaching assistants have become more involved in observing the teams and providing feedback geared to increasing team effectiveness.
- More classroom time is now devoted to the Industry Report and developing research skills in the library.

Abstract Writing Pre-/Post-test. The results of the abstract writing pre-/post-test are summarized below:

Insert Table 2 approximately here

The abstract writing pre-/post-test were administered the second year the course was offered with 98 students completing both pre- and post-test assignments. Students improved significantly in all aspects of abstract writing except the ability to summarize material using their own words. In the case of summarizing in their own words, students' scores declined significantly. All other areas showed significant improvement with students showing the most improvement in their ability to write concisely, and identify the main idea and key points of the abstract. The decline in students' ability to write using their own works in disturbing and difficult to explain, especially considering students had the highest pretest scores in this area. It may be that students took short cuts at the end of the semester in order to complete the assignment quickly; and, thus, copied more from the article instead of using their own words. Information provided by the abstract writing assessment has led to placing more emphasis on encouraging students to write using their own words.

## CONCLUSION

The Gateway to Business course was developed in response to a number of factors including faculty concerns, employers' concerns about student preparation for the work force, and general calls for reform of the first-year college experience for students. Through this first-year course, students are immersed in the culture of the School of Business from the start and seem to have developed identification with the school in terms of work ethic and professional performance. Their evaluations of the course have been positive and their enthusiasm is shared by faculty, staff, and administrators campus-wide. Preliminary assessments of the course along with anecdotal evidence suggest that the course objectives are being realized.

Anecdotal evidence from students, teaching assistants, faculty, and administrators are confirming the course's success. Students who have taken the course state that it was more work than they expected and more work than their general education courses; however, they go on to explain that they get more out of the course. One student commented: "I developed my computer skills, found out how difficult and rewarding teamwork can be, and had a lot of help finding things around campus. I definitely want to be a business student—the business school has provided me with a great experience this semester—better than any of my other courses—it seems to really care about us." A few students who have changed majors admitted that they enjoyed the course, but discovered by taking the course that business was not their passion.

Professors in the school that are now getting students who have taken Gateway to Business claim that they are finding students better prepared to study and more adept at teamwork, research, and computer skills than in previous years. The course is emerging as a recruiting tool since parents and prospective students nationwide have begun to inquire about the existence and nature of structured first-year experiences in the

disciplines. Data collection for studying the effects of the course on retention is showing a positive result.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the course is meeting its objectives comes from alumni reports that the skills learned in Gateway to Business are helping them better meet the expectations of the working world as demonstrated in this student's statement:

“The thing that really helped me in my academic program was working on PowerPoint. In Gateway to Business, I became familiar with all the different aspects of PowerPoint and it came in really handy in my internship with a mall-marketing firm. I needed a clever way to convince a company to lease space in the mall and decided to use a PowerPoint presentation. Everyone loved the presentation. The things I learned in Gateway are really helpful in the working world.”

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## APPENDIX A

### MGT 110 – COURSE ASSESSMENT

Please complete each of the following questions by filling in the appropriate circle on the scorecard. Use the following scale to indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statements below: a=strongly agree, b=somewhat agree, c=undecided or no opinion, d=somewhat disagree, e=strongly disagree

1. The course provided me with support in my transition from high school to college.
2. I developed an understanding of what the School of Business expects of me academically.
3. I was introduced to resources that will be helpful to me throughout my college career.
4. The course has either reinforced my decision to become a business major or has helped me realize that business is not the right major for me.
5. Assignments and exercises in the course increased my ability to think critically.
6. I learned how critical thinking is used in making business decisions.
7. I learned the difference between fact and opinion.
8. The Gateway to Business critical thinking assignments increased my ability to critically analyze and evaluate evidence.
9. I am now better able to recognize errors in thinking and decision making.
10. I am now better able to express my ideas persuasively..
11. The industry report taught me to apply critical thinking skills in a business context.
12. The time management assignment enabled me to develop a plan for more effectively managing my time.
13. The course helped me form a close bond with other business students.
14. The course has increased my confidence in my ability to conduct library and Internet research.
15. Overall, the computer exercises/assignments helped me improve my computing skills.
16. Assignments and exercises in the course have increased my ability to think creatively.
17. I have a better idea of the career path I might want to follow.
18. My ability to manage the stress I experience as a student has improved.
19. My ability to manage my time has improved.

20. The assignments in the *Gateway to Business* textbook were clearly explained.
21. The material in the *Gateway to Business* textbook was clearly presented.
22. The material in the *Gateway to Business* textbook was interesting.
23. The *Decision Traps* textbook helped me understand decision-making in business.
24. The material in the *Decision Traps* textbook was interesting.
25. The material in the *Decision Traps* textbook was clearly presented.
26. The reading assignments helped me learn the course material.
27. The writing assignments helped me improve my writing skills.
28. The writing assignments helped me learn the course material.
29. The writing assignments helped me improve my ability to write a research paper.
30. The team presentation helped me improve my presentation skills.
31. Now that I have completed the course, I feel more comfortable speaking in front of a group of students.
32. Writing a team paper was a difficult challenge.
33. This course helped me learn the fundamentals of working in a team.
34. I had the opportunity to develop new teamwork skills.
35. I feel confident that I can plan out a project with a team.
36. My teamwork skills improved over the semester.
37. My team project was a success.
38. The members of my team had the right combination of skills necessary to accomplish the team assignments.
39. Working in a team has been an educational challenge.
40. I got to know the members of my team very well during the semester.
41. I was able to develop trust in my team by the end of the semester.
42. Decision-making was a problem for my team.
43. Participation was a problem for some of my team members.
44. Communication was a problem for my team.
45. Conflict was a problem for my team.
46. All of my team members contributed their fair share to the team project.
47. I found the work in this course challenging.
48. I was able to accomplish more than I expected.
49. The variety of assignments helped make the course more interesting.
50. I would recommend this course to a friend who is thinking about becoming a business major.
51. I think this course should continue to be a required course for freshman business majors.
52. The weekly (Monday) lectures were interesting.
53. The weekly (Monday) lectures were educational.

### PLEASE COMMENT

**In the space below, please comment on the following questions. (Your answers will provide us with valuable information for improving the course.)**

What skill areas, if any, does the course need to devote less time to?

What skill areas, if any, does the course need to devote more time to?

What have been the 3 strongest aspects of the course? Why?

What have been the 3 weakest aspects of the course? Why?

Please describe your experience with working in team.

What were the top 3 benefits of working on a team?

What were the top 3 challenges you faced working on a team?

Who were your teaching assistants? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Please comment on their ability to provide you with the help and support you needed in making your transition from high school to college both academically and personally.

Do you have any recommendations for improving the course?

Please use the space below (and on the back) to make any additional comments about the course:

## APPENDIX B

### Abstract Writing Assessment Rubric

Circle the number for each category that best describes the abstract. Refer to “Performance Levels for Abstract Writing” for a more detailed description of performance standards in each category.

#### 1. Abstract written in student’s own words

Sentences copied  
from article

1                      2                      3                      4

Written in student’s  
own words

5

#### 2. Abstract emphasizes main idea and key points

Main idea and key  
points not specified

1                      2                      3                      4

Main idea and key  
points emphasized

5

#### 3. Abstract represents author’s view accurately

Represents author's  
view inaccurately

1                      2                      3                      4

Represents author's  
view accurately

5

**4. Abstract is written concisely and clearly**

Wordy, unclear,  
unnecessary information

1                      2                      3                      4

Written concisely  
and clearly

5

**5. Abstract is free of grammatical errors, spelling errors, awkward sentences**

Many errors

1                      2                      3                      4

Error free

5

Total points \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**

**Business Skills Self-Assessment**

*RATING SCALE*

*a- Strongly Agree*

*e- Slightly Disagree*

*b- Agree*

*f- Disagree*

*c- Slightly Agree*

*g- Strongly Disagree*

*d- Neutral*

1. I usually collect information before I start a project or paper
2. I am very familiar with using libraries
3. I am very familiar with electronic databases and sources used in libraries.
4. I use email
5. I use word processing
6. I use spreadsheets
7. I make graphs using spreadsheet data
8. I use Power Point
9. I use the Internet
10. I am a very good writer
11. I am very good at making presentations
12. I have strong interpersonal communication skills
13. I am good at research
14. I am good at creative projects
15. I am well organized
16. I know how to manage my time in order to get a lot of things done
17. I enjoy working in teams
18. I am a good team leader

Figure One

**Gateway to Business Model**

<b>Teamwork</b>	<b>Computer Skills</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team Charter assignment</li> <li>• Leadership Weekend Training</li> <li>• Industry report/presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSWord, PowerPoint, Excel</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Internet/library databases</li> </ul>
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	<b>Business Writing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluating evidence and arguments</li> <li>• Recognizing errors in thinking</li> <li>• Group decision-making</li> <li>• Persuasion and application</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal writing</li> <li>• Abstract writing</li> <li>• Industry report</li> <li>• Resume/Portfolio</li> </ul>
<b>Research</b>	<b>Oral Communication Skills</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Library overview</li> <li>• Industry report</li> <li>• Critical thinking assignments</li> <li>• APA documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom discussion</li> <li>• Presentation development/delivery</li> <li>• Experiential exercises</li> <li>• Industry presentation</li> </ul>
<b>Contemporary Business Issues</b>	<b>Managing the Academic Experience</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Group Processes</li> <li>• Diversity and Globalization</li> <li>• Careers in Business/Internships</li> <li>• Business Ethics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress/Time management</li> <li>• Registration</li> <li>• Peer mentoring</li> <li>• Leadership training</li> </ul>

**Table 1**

**Transition to College Item Responses**

Percentage responding (n=157)

(a=strongly agree, b=somewhat agree, c=undecided or no opinion, d=somewhat disagree, e=strongly disagree)

Survey statement	a	b	c	d	e
School of Business academic expectations	41%	39%	11%	4%	4%
Introduction to helpful resources	46%	38%	8%	8%	1%
Close bond with other business students	38%	34%	15%	10%	3%
Improvement in stress management	24%	41%	17%	14%	4%
Improvement in time management	24%	39%	18%	11%	5%
Support in my transition to college	41%	39%	11%	4%	4%

**Table 2**  
**Skills Self Assessment**  
**Results**

	Pretest	Posttest	Difference	% CHG	95% Confidence Interval*
<b>Research/Teamwork Skills</b>					
I usually collect information before I start a project or paper	1.76	1.74	0.01	0%	0.894
I am very familiar with using libraries	2.89	2.46	0.43	6%	0.001
I am good at research	2.93	3.02	-0.09	-1%	0.653
I am good at creative projects	3.06	2.70	0.36	5%	0.032
I am well organized	2.60	2.40	0.20	3%	0.353
I know how to manage my time in order to get a lot of things done	3.09	2.74	0.35	5%	0.088
I enjoy working in teams	2.57	2.84	-0.28	-4%	0.051
I am a good team leader	2.81	2.74	0.07	1%	0.912
Average Change (of factors at least the .10 Sig. Level)				5%	
<b>Technology Skills</b>					
I am very familiar with electronic databases and sources used in libraries	3.43	2.74	0.69	10%	0.000
I am very good with using computers	2.85	2.23	0.62	9%	0.000
I use e-mail	1.81	1.23	0.59	8%	0.000
I use word processing	1.57	1.15	0.42	6%	0.000
I use spreadsheets	3.48	2.65	0.82	12%	0.000
I make graphs using spreadsheet data	4.09	2.87	1.22	17%	0.000
I use PowerPoint	4.26	2.38	1.88	27%	0.000
I use the Internet	1.79	1.26	0.53	8%	0.000
Average Change (of factors at least the .10 Sig. Level)				12%	
<b>Communication Skills</b>					
I am a very good writer	3.41	2.75	0.66	9%	0.000
I am very good at making presentations	3.93	3.26	0.66	9%	0.000
I have strong interpersonal communication skills	2.94	2.67	0.27	4%	0.078
Average Change (of factors at least the .10 Sig. Level)				7.3%	

**\*Equal variances not assumed**