

# INNOVATION AND FAITH INTEGRATION IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CAPSTONE STRATEGY COURSE

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**ABSTRACT:** In undergraduate business education, the high expectation and hope is that students will graduate ready to meet the challenges of a complex business work world. Such preparation requires integrated thinking and problem solving ability. Business education faces certain “integration challenges,” which must be embraced and then overcome. Those challenges include the integration of business disciplines, the integration of theory and practice, and the integration of faith and learning. The capstone Business Strategy course is an excellent place to work through those challenges. Our purpose here is to offer specific teaching techniques for the Strategy course which will help overcome those integration challenges and effectively prepare students for the work environment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In undergraduate business education, the high expectation and hope is that students will graduate ready to meet the challenges of a complex business work world. As educators, we are in the business of preparing practitioners, “thoughtful practitioners” (Raelin, 2007: 495). Such preparation requires integrated thinking and problem solving ability. When our students graduate from our business schools, we want them to be ready for that complex business world that they will enter. However, business education faces certain “integration challenges,” which must be met. Those challenges include the integration of business disciplines, the integration of theory and practice, and the integration of faith and learning. The Business Strategy course, which most schools offer as the capstone course, is an excellent place to work through those challenges. This senior-level capstone course has traditionally included some combination of lectures and exercises with a heavy emphasis on case studies and company analysis. While that approach has been the mainstay for some time, we believe the Strategy course can be improved by incorporating certain innovative techniques. Our purpose here is to offer specific teaching techniques for the Strategy course which will help overcome those integration challenges and effectively prepare our students for the work environment they will face upon graduation. In this paper, we will present background on the Strategy course, three integration challenges, descriptions of five teaching techniques for Strategy, and student feedback.

## **STRATEGY COURSE**

Policy and Strategy, sometimes referred to as Administrative Policy, has been a staple offering of business programs for over 40 years in most business schools. As the capstone course, Policy and Strategy represents the culmination of business education for undergraduates. It carries a heavy load – it is the institution’s last chance to impart as much wisdom as possible to the students, and it is the last frontier of exploration for students ready to graduate. We want to insure that on the

day after graduation, students find themselves well-prepared to face the current challenges of the workplace and the world they are entering. This capstone course was created with several objectives in mind. Many who teach Strategy would agree on at least several of the following of objectives for the course.

- 1) Students (future business leaders) will understand the comprehensive nature of business and business challenges. Students will appreciate that business situations are a complex mix of management, marketing, accounting, manufacturing, finance, and technology issues.
- 2) Students will learn key concepts and develop skills in using tools of analysis from the field of strategic management, such as, SWOT, Five Forces, and Life Cycle Analysis.
- 3) Students who are about to enter the work force will have an understanding of the latest real world issues that they will confront.
- 4) Students will demonstrate team-based skills that are increasingly being demanded by organizations today.
- 5) Students will learn and practice sound decision making skills.
- 6) Students will consider their future career and calling in terms of their unique skills, abilities, and distinctive competencies given to them by God.
- 7) Students will learn to incorporate their Christian faith when addressing business issues, problems, and opportunities.

One can hardly argue with this list although we do not claim it to be an exhaustive list. The question is how to best accomplish these objectives. To date, professors of Strategy have focused on the first two objectives by emphasizing analytical tools and case studies. The authors of this paper would argue that “teaching Strategy ain’t what it used to be.” To truly accomplish the objectives listed above, we must reconsider our tools and methodologies in Policy and Strategy. For example, the use of textbook cases has been a staple offering in strategy courses for years. This is a time-honored tradition, but unfortunately these cases are often badly out of date even as the ink hits the most current edition of the textbook. Can we really teach state of the art theories and applications using outdated texts and outdated cases? Many would defend the use of cases and even classic cases as a basis of teaching strategic principles. While we would not argue that point directly, we would suggest at a minimum, placing the past firmly within the context of the present and future. As another example, short “situation cases” can be used in the classroom to illustrate certain strategic

concepts. But do they really point to the complexities of realistic business situations? Perhaps they do have some value in the classroom. However, they do not give students the chance to grapple with complex decision making in a dynamic business environment, which is what they'll face upon graduation. The past 10-12 years have seen a string of frame-breaking and even cataclysmic changes in our economic system that cannot be glossed over in business education. These changes, starting with 9/11 and going forward, have greatly influenced the business landscape. This is the environment that our students must prepare for. The environment we are in now and can anticipate for the immediate to long term future is one of major change, disruption, and even chaos. This environment is central to strategic thinking for today and the future. We believe that in order to accomplish the many objectives of a Strategy course in the current and future business climate, we must be more innovative in our teaching methodology and, at the same time, offer our students more relevant content than what we have offered in the past.

## **INTEGRATION CHALLENGES**

### **Integrating Business Disciplines**

In designing or redesigning the Strategy course, at least three integration challenges can and should be recognized in undergraduate business education. First, the business disciplines must be brought together so that students can see the inter-connected complexity of business problems and situation. We consider the integration of business disciplines one of the three significant integration challenges in business education. Indeed, one of the original intentions of this “capstone” course was to encourage and/or force the integration of various disciplines within the field of business into a comprehensive whole and to help students make the transition from the classroom to the real business world (as indicated in objective #1 above). Just as business units often operate in functional silos, the business disciplines often remain overly separated throughout the student's undergraduate experience. Using case study analysis requires students to study company and industry situations

from all perspectives and to recommend solutions that will fully address the real, messiness of business strategy. The integrative nature of the Strategy course has been what sets it apart from most other courses in the business curriculum. We believe that though business discipline integration occurs through case study analysis, more can be done through innovation assignments to address this challenge. We will offer related specific suggestions later in this paper.

### **Integrating Theory and Application**

A second integration challenge for business education is to close the distance between theory and practice. Recent business and ethical failures, the current national and global economy, and the ongoing concern about the theory-application gap (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer, & Fong, 2003; Aram & Salipante, 2003; Baldrige et al., 2004; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) are all pressing business schools to consider carefully how to better educate tomorrow's business managers and leaders. Those pressures have forced business schools to strengthen business programs with more experiential learning and greater opportunities to connect theory and practice. For example, the benefits of using simulations (Devasagayam & Hyat, 2007; Salas et al., 2009; Xu & Yang, 2010), internships (C'Abate et al., 2009; Narayanan, et al., 2010), and service-learning (Farazmand et al., 2010; Lee, 2010; Zlotkowski, 1996) in undergraduate business programs are more common and are becoming well documented. Such pedagogical tools offer students enough risk to be realistic with the added safety net of the educational context. We believe that the Strategy course, as the last step before graduation, is an optimal time for creatively integrating theory and practice.

Over the past several decades, business schools have been criticized (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2003) for not adequately preparing graduates with appropriate levels of both theory and application. Business schools have tended to either over-emphasize theory to the neglect of application or focus on practical application with little regard for theoretical underpinnings (Wren et al., 2007). Because of the negative press and increased competitive pressures in higher education,

business schools have been required to re-think curriculum and methodologies. Are students prepared to face the challenges of the current workplace? Are our practices in the classroom appropriately matched to the realities our students will face when they graduate? As the capstone course, Policy and Strategy is a prime opportunity for giving students what they really need, solid understanding of theory and good practice applying it to real situations.

Even with, or in spite of, the theory-application gap in business education, current literature provides support for a relational circle of theory and practice in business. That is, it is not assumed that the theory-application dichotomy is inevitable. Several scholars have proposed models and documented the potential inter-connectivity of managers, researchers, consultants, students, and professors (Starkey & Madan, 2001; Aram & Salipante, 2003; Rynes et al., 2001; Van de Ven & Johnston, 2006, Burke & Rau, 2011; Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan, & Wornham, 2011). Starkey and Madan describe “a virtuous circle of academics learning from managers, codifying information into blueprints for managerial practice, and managers learning from academics, developing and applying practically-derived theories” (2001: S11). These serve to illustrate the circular pattern which can be summed up as “a delicate balance of building theory, testing our theories for significance, making connections with practitioners of the crucible of applicability, and providing the knowledge gained to those who are our consumers” (Wren, Halbesleben, & Buckley 2007: 485).

A recent study, conducted by one of the authors of this paper, included focused, one-on-one interviews with professors regarding the theory-application gap in undergraduate management education. Among other things, the interviewees highlighted the idea of how a student *knows it*. That is, how does one know or learn theory, and how does one know or learn to apply it? On the one hand, pure theory cannot be digested (by undergraduates) and real application (real decision making in a real company) is not allowed just yet. In most situations, one cannot fully understand theory until one has applied it. So, there's a bit of a catch-22. Perhaps students can “see” the theory well

enough to pass the exam, but can they really apply it? That is the litmus test for knowing it. It is our job as professors, to make that link obvious, clear, and strong. We do this through our methodologies and practices in the classroom and curriculum.

Another finding from this set of interviews was a theme of *preparedness*. Professors interviewed were unanimous in their concern for preparing students. A prepared student is one who is confidently ready to meet the expectations of employers. Interviewees' comments reflect the view that students who have experienced traveling from theory to application and back to theory are ready and able to go into the workplace adopting and interpreting theory to fit different situations. Again, this view points to the choices professors make when designing the business curriculum, particularly the Strategy course.

Throughout the interview process, professors were eager to share ways they believe help bring together theory and application. The list includes meta-assignments (combining several pedagogical techniques), service learning, project/product based assignments, field experience learning (international), case studies with one page analysis, simulations (including the accompanying stress and potential for failure); internships, real client consulting (business plans, interview/selection processes, marketing plans, web-site development, recommendations to management), internships for undergraduates in companies with graduate students, and progressive projects which are current event projects lasting the entire semester. These viewpoints reinforce findings from the literature, particularly regarding the intentional use of collaborative efforts, classroom research, and cross-company (and cross-discipline) projects.

The collective wisdom of the respondents suggests that theory alone is worth very little (or is even worthless) and that application alone is just a collection of stories which are easily forgotten and are, in fact, never applied. Stated in the positive, we can and should find ways to place high

emphasis on both theory and application, simultaneously. We believe this can be done effectively by creating innovative assignments for the Strategy course.

### **Integration Faith and Learning**

Third, Christian professors face the challenge of integrating faith and learning. Much has been written on this topic (Marsden, 1997; Holmes, 1977; Dockery, 1996; Noll, 1995), especially among those involved in faith-based institutions. Many, if not all, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) schools are explicitly committed to bringing together faith and learning for their students. As well, many Christian professors at secular universities seek subtle ways to encourage faith conversations inside and outside the classroom. We believe the Strategy course provides a particular opportunity for students to consider how their own faith informs the way they will live their lives and conduct their business.

Christian professors can and should help students learn what to expect, realistically, in the business world. For example, topical discussions in class may be more “theoretical or idealistic” in nature than is actually the case in employment settings. Unless corrected, our students may graduate with a naïve conception of what the rough and tumble real world is all about. As a part of preparing our students for the real world, we must demonstrate how Scripture and Christian concepts can be applied in settings that are not necessarily Christian.

This was brought home a few years ago by a wonderful Christian businessman who served on one of our external advisory boards. He was very supportive of our institution and Christian education. But he reminded us in a kind but firm matter that we and our students need to understand something. To paraphrase his thoughts, “it is great for your students to have a Christian faith, moral and ethical ideals, but in the end your graduates have to ask themselves, ‘What do you contribute to the bottom-line?’” While a sobering thought, we contend that our students are in a very strong position to answer that question. The Strategy class is one where we must consistently

get students to examine their distinctive God-given competencies in relationship to their career and future contributions.

Our students are increasingly not just competing with other students from United States' universities, but on a worldwide basis. Unless our students are “verbally shaken out of their sleep” many of them leave our institutions with a false sense of preparation and even a bit of arrogance. On the other hand, our students do receive a fine education and need to learn how to package their distinctive competencies.

## **TEACHING TECHNIQUES**

Given the current business climate, the typical Strategy course, and the challenges described above, we now turn our attention to teaching techniques actually used in our Strategy courses. Traditionally, the focus has been on analytical tools and case studies. We see some value in using textbook cases. However, we see several limitations if one is overly focused or exclusively focused on case studies. While we continue to offer the traditional course with considerable success, we recognize several limitations which we will outline below. The list of limitations we will continue with our proposed innovative techniques and the feedback we have received from students who have completed those assignments and major projects.

### **Limitations of Textbook Case Study Analysis**

A major concern regarding case study analysis is that most case studies are quickly outdated even in new textbooks. For example, many 2013 copyrighted books carry cases which are at least two years dated at the time of publication. Use of even “new” cases from other sources usually requires considerable updating and revision. While classic cases are instructive, more often than not the issues or context are dramatically different. Many publishers are now coming out with non-case versions of their textbooks because of this problem. Secondly, by the time they are seniors; many

students have heard the entire lingo about JIT, lean manufacturing, program planning, globalization, strategy formulation, and implementation, etc. But they tend to question whether these things are actually used in the “real world.” For example, many business schools and textbooks have in fact tended to de-emphasize manufacturing in recent years and our students do not have adequate exposure to these topics. Thirdly, many of our students end up with careers in non-business environments such as non-profit institutions, government or other types of service organizations, and most traditional strategy textbooks and courses do not adequately cover quasi-business organizations.

### **Innovative Techniques**

Specific techniques utilized in the current version of our courses will be detailed and then analyzed from the students’ perspectives. A general list is included below. Both authors have used these techniques and have adapted them to our specific location, students, and institutions. The first technique is somewhat traditional with a contemporary twist. The next four techniques are more original and represent a substantial innovative contribution to the Strategy course.

#### ***Technique #1 - Lectures with Real Time Events***

Lectures have clearly been a mainstay of university education. However, we have found that lectures designed around real time events can be much more effective. And while lectures are a tried and true method of transmitting information, they have limitations, especially in this era of increasingly short students’ attention spans. Millennials who have grown up in an electronic world thrive on multi-tasking and multiple sensory experiences. Millennials are smart but impatient; they are used to short-term gratification; they are masters of multi-tasking. They seem to enjoy and thrive on collaboration. In some cases, what is considered cheating by traditional professors is seen as team-work to many of our current students. We as professors feel pressure to shorten lectures and

deal with a new reality. Undoubtedly, Millennials don't read as much as previous generations did, at least in the traditional media. They prefer video, audio, and interactive media.

In our Strategy courses we have found it effective to use the text only as a base and almost daily update the students and engage them in events as reported on CNBC, other real time news feeds, video series, and/or current business magazines. We use direct clips from the CNBC website as well as other relevant sites. Along with these lectures, we make extensive use of video-like cases from sources such as CBNC, the History, Channel and PBS. One example is David Favor's CNBC's program, "The New Age of Wal-Mart," as a real-time case over 4-5 weeks. Fortunately, there is also a growing library of Christian-based videos. In recent years, Christian based videos such as the "Call of the Entrepreneur," John Beckett's "Loving Monday," and Dr. Susan Emmerich's "When Heaven Meets Earth" has been added to our video library. Of particular interest to Christian Business Professors is Mike Zigarelli's substantial library of practical and easy to read articles assembled online as *Christianity 9 to 5*. Other resources such as Regent University's Global Business Review and the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business (JBIB)* and *Christian Business Academy Review (CBAR)* are rich sources of application material that can be used effectively in a Strategy course. It is not necessarily "new" to use a popular business magazine (for example, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Harvard Business Review*, etc.) in class as supplemental reading. However, it is more innovative to *lead* with those current event articles and supplement them with the appropriate theoretical concepts.

Certainly, if we just show videos a majority of students will just watch and not take notes. One effective remedy is writing viewing guides that students must hand in at the end of the class period. We also give students the opportunity to come in for one or more video nights to earn extra credit by watching and analyzing tapes on companies such Nike, IKEA, Levi's, and GM that are easily obtainable and are current. While professors can abuse videos in lieu of lecture time, in the

2009 survey when asked whether videos were used the proper amount; 8% said too little; 86% said about right and only 2% said too much.

### ***Technique #2 - Mega-Issues***

One of our more innovative assignments, the Mega-Issue Report, was developed by one of the authors about five years ago. It has been used successfully for several semesters by both authors. The assignment is for students to select, research, and present on a foremost current trend in business and society. Students are expected to focus on a major issue - a mega-issue. In our experience we have found that students lack a fundamental understanding of major issues that impact the world of business. While we are awash in information and data, one could arguably say that many of this generation are among the most uninformed in the last 50 years. With each passing year, we believe we have witnessed a steady decline in knowledge about basic politics, economics, and global issues. So while students spend vast amount of time surfing the Internet and participating in social media, many of them are not well informed of big picture issues in the world. Students might recognize the name of the trend or issue, but the typical 22 year old does not have a sophisticated understanding of the world around them. While we might be able to dismiss this as college students just being college students, we think it is more serious than that and employers have the right to expect business college graduates to function at a much higher level.

The Mega-Issue Report requires students to address a real world issue, usually much bigger than a single business situation, and to analyze its past, present, and likely future. In teams of three-four, students choose from a list of high impact issues, create an in-depth professionally produced Power Point presentation, present the issue, lead a discussion, and write 10 original quiz questions that are administered immediately after the presentation.

The topics are far ranging and tied to ongoing major issues as well as “hot” issues. Students are expected to apply the theoretical principles from the course to large scale business and social

problems that present both strategic challenges and opportunities for businesses and other organizations. Recent topics include population growth, alternative energy, social security solvency, growing power of Asia, and increasing obesity as a healthcare issue (see Appendix for additional topics). We challenge the students to see these issues from a Christian perspective as well as the traditional functional integrative approach advocated by the discipline of strategy. Each presentation is then followed directly by an “Insta-quiz” to encourage the students to pay attention.

At the end of the day, we believe that our business students coming out of the capstone strategy class are better informed than any other student groups graduating from our universities on current economic, business, and even political issues. A survey was conducted among two sections of strategy in late 2009. When asked whether they thought the Mega Issue was a good use of time 65% said a good use of time; 31% and excellent use of time and only 4% indicted it was a poor use of time.

### ***Technique #3 - Community Leadership Forum Series***

The business department at one of the author’s university has developed a “Community Leadership Forum Series” where we bring outstanding speakers to the campus. While it is not unique to use guest speakers in classes and forums, one of the distinctive approaches we use is to combine these lectures, speeches, and interactions to encourage more direct contact and interaction with the local business community and our students. Even at our relatively small universities, there are very close working relationships between our students, businesses, nonprofit and professional communities. And because of the ongoing efforts at strategic partnerships we have a very positive and strong reputation. Due to these strong partnerships when we host events, we invite several business people to come and join the students. We often provide a free lunch (through the use of foundation funds) and deliberately intersperse our students among our business guests.

In recent years, we have hosted a Canadian Trade Commissioner, a newly appointed State Senator, a former chairman of AT & T Wireless, and a successful non-profit consultant. We also recently sponsored a Young Professional Women's Seminar with six prominent and successful area women ranging from plant managers, to a newspaper editor, to an attorney. For our community forums, we intentionally invite 30-35 key area business leaders along with 30-35 of our students and make sure they inter-mix. While the speakers are informative, the networking, and learning how to converse with local business leaders maybe the primary benefit. In several cases we have deliberately sponsored some of these forums with Christian organizations such as CBMC. In addition to hosting these events, our students have been invited and encouraged to attend major events sponsored by the State of Illinois, a regional Chamber of Commerce, and our local newspaper. Recently we were able to share a speaker brought to town by the local CBMC group for their annual prayer breakfast. David Rae, the former Chairman of Apple Computer of Canada and now associated with Crown Ministries, gave a compelling testimony and was able to share thoughts on Steve Jobs who had just recently passed away. At these events, students learn valuable facts and information. However, of equal or greater value is the networking and camaraderie that develops between students and the business people. Students get an opportunity to converse with business professionals about real issues in real time. We believe the Strategy course is an optimal time for students to participate in these events and that the potential impact on students and their lives beyond college are great.

#### ***Technique #4 - Original Case Analysis***

Although we previously outlined specific limitations to tradition case study analysis, we are NOT against case studies. Our more innovative approach is to require students to choose a major company and essentially write their own case study on that company. Writing an original case (see Figure 1 for contents) is more satisfying and more demanding and also builds stronger analytical and writing skills. It also allows students, in many instances, to select a company or industry that they are

targeting for career opportunities. And the finished product can become an important item in the students' personal portfolios.

**Figure 1: Original Case Specifications**

Component	Points	Description
Case Overview and Summary 3-5 pages	20	Summarize the company's situation. Provide background on founding, how the company has developed over time its current status.
Statement of Key issues and problems 2-3 pages	15	There should be 4-5 key issues, problems, challenges. Pick the most significant one and in 2-3 paragraphs elaborate on why this is the most important issues
Tools of analysis 5-6 pages	50	Choose 3 of the following SWOT; Five forces; Environmental scanning; Industry/life cycle analysis; Distinctive competencies; Strategic group; analysis + everyone must do a financial analysis.
Alternative Generations 2-3 pages	15	Generation of at least 3 potential ways to address the key issue you have chosen. Develop each one and then based on criteria you have set forth chose which one you recommend and why.
Alternative Strategy justification and implementation 7-11 pages	70	In depth justification of your chosen alternative and its implementation. Students are encouraged in this section to think through the implications from a Christian worldview.
Grammar and writing	40	Professionalism in writing, professionally bound and general appearance.
Research and use of appropriate sources	40	Quality and range of sources- used to provide evidence for your conclusions.

The authors have cast this assignment in two different ways. One aims for a professionally bound document which becomes a part of a student's portfolio. The other author requires students to present their findings in a "defense" type question-and-answer session with the Dean of the school asking tough questions. Both authors believe their students are learning several skills through this exercise, including the ability to "sell" and defend their ideas from the justification and implementation portion of the paper

This particular approach that requires an original case analysis has dramatic potential for reducing the theory-application gap for students. Students are forced to research in journals they

might not otherwise be aware of; they must do real time current research, propose solutions and defend their ideas. Using the highly structured, six-stage decision-making model in their case development requires integration and a great deal of research and original thought. This exercise prepares students for creating, analyzing, and selling of their ideas once they are hired.

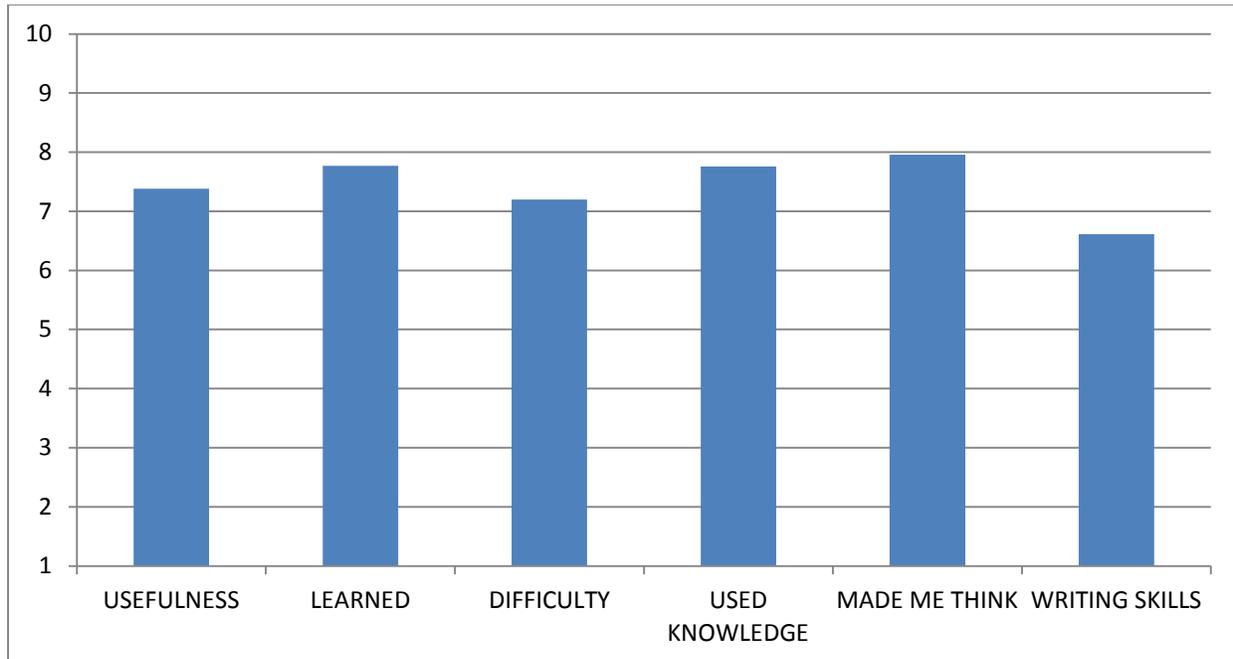
The feedback from the 2009 surveys is positive (see Figures 2 and 3 below). This is not an easy project, but some students have told us they have actually gotten job offers based on this particular project. It demonstrates to a potential employer that this applicant can think, analyze, decide, communicate, and persuade.

**Figure 2: Semantic differentials on Original Case**

End point -	End point +	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 No use	10 Highly useful	7.38	1.42
1 Learned nothing	10 Learned a great deal	7.71	1.47
1 Too Easy	10 Very difficult	7.20	1.31
1 Did not use knowledge from other courses	10 Did use knowledge from other courses	7.76	1.44
1 No brainer	10 Made me think hard	7.96	1.29
1 Did not improve my writing skills	10 Improved my writing skills	6.61	2.23

Average time spent 16.67 Hours Std. Deviation 8.29

**Figure 3: Semantic differentials on Original Case – Graphics results**



#### ***Technique #5 - Personal Strategic Plan –PSP***

Probably the most original of all the techniques employed is the Personal Strategic Plan (PSP). It is also an excellent place for all levels of integration, particularly faith and learning. After many years of teaching and consulting, we both have significant understanding of formulating and implementing company strategic plans. However, students do not always grasp it fully. One of the authors developed this PSP assignment which requires students to apply the planning process to something they are really interested in – namely themselves! For them, it is much more engaging than planning a strategy for some theoretical company out there!

In a nutshell, the PSP is an assignment where students must assess the environment in which they will be working, the opportunities and threats of that environment, their own value, strengths and weaknesses, and their goals for the future. Basically, we have students take the analytical tools used on companies and industries and apply those tools to themselves. We have found it to be exceptionally well-received, especially among seniors who are about to graduate and enter the next

phase in their lives and careers. Given the very challenging job environment we are facing, this class project is now more important than ever because it can be an invaluable tool to help students realistically assess and plan their future.

The PSP is best utilized in the Strategy course with an introduction to the assignment early in the semester. To set the stage, the Professor tells Strategy students, “A fundamental question of strategy for the Christian believer is: *How can I honor God in the strategy process?* In this class, we will address personal and organizational goals and ethics. That is, the strong foundation of effective managerial decision making. Therefore, an important theme for this course is, “be strong and courageous.” Drawing from Deuteronomy 31, the Professor tells the story of the Israelites taking the land God has promised them. In the process, they must face some very serious enemies and rely on God throughout the process. The repeated theme of Deuteronomy is to, “be strong and courageous.” Moses tells the people. Moses tells Joshua. God tells Joshua. Joshua tells the people. Everyone tells everyone to be strong and courageous because God goes with them and will not leave them. Students are encouraged to reflect on those words as they make their plans for the future. All strategy students are facing graduation and an intense workplace. All students, including non-Christians, can participate because it is a personal reflection exercise. Since the Christian student has the additional purpose of pleasing God in life and relying on God’s wisdom and strength, their personal reflection on “be strong and courageous” will likely be more God-oriented. So, all students are required to consider what it will mean for them to “be strong and courageous” and to incorporate those ideas into their Personal Strategic Plan.

The PSP is a 10-15 page document which includes a title page, table of contents, and the sections described below. The finished product should be professionally bound and ready to distribute to potential employers, as appropriate.

- 1) Environmental Scan – list and describe the economic, legal/political, technological, global, and cultural aspects of the general environment and how those factors relate to you and your career for the next 5-10 years
- 2) Stakeholders – identify your 8-10 key stakeholders or individuals who “have a stake” in you, and explain how each has invested in your life and future
- 3) Life Lessons – list 6-8 lessons you have learned thus far in your life and describe why each is important to you now and into the future
- 4) Core values & Mission/Vision Statement – list your 8-10 personal core values and develop a 2-sentence personal mission/vision statement
- 5) Personal SWOT – conduct a SWOT analysis on yourself, identifying your strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats
- 6) Statement of Competitive Advantage – clearly and honestly state the competitive strength or contribution that you bring to an organization as an employee
- 7) Goals – identify list 5-7 SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-based) goals for your personal and/or professional life

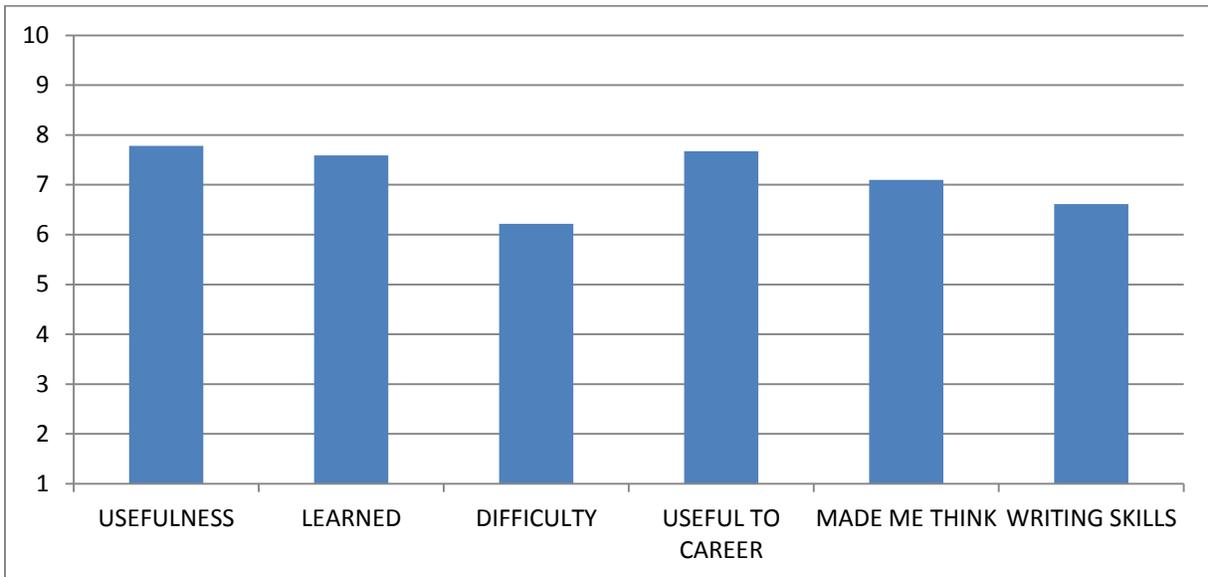
Of all the techniques we have reviewed here, our experience and preliminary research tells us that the PSP experience is the most unique approach that is worthy of adoption by other universities. Tabulated results from the 2009 survey are encouraging in supporting the efficacy of the project (see Figures 4 and 5 below).

**Figure 4: Semantic differentials on Personal Strategic Plan – 2009 Data**

<b>End point -</b>	<b>End point +</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>1 No use</b>	<b>10 Highly useful</b>	<b>7.78</b>	<b>1.64</b>
<b>1 Learned nothing</b>	<b>10 Learned a great deal</b>	<b>7.59</b>	<b>1.70</b>
<b>1 Too Easy</b>	<b>10 Very difficult</b>	<b>6.22</b>	<b>1.14</b>
<b>1 Not useful too career</b>	<b>10 Useful to career</b>	<b>7.67</b>	<b>1.82</b>
<b>1 No brainer</b>	<b>10 Made me think hard</b>	<b>7.10</b>	<b>1.65</b>
<b>1 Did not improve my writing skills</b>	<b>10 Improved my writing skills</b>	<b>6.61</b>	<b>2.23</b>

**Average time spent 9.54 Hours Std. Deviation 4.39**

**Figure 5: Semantic differentials on Personal Strategic Plan – 2009 Data- Graphic results**



Additional research on the PSP was conducted in late spring of 2011. Figure 6 includes a sample of written comments current students and graduates of both authors about the PSP. One author asked students for some written comments. The other author conducted an online survey about three weeks after the end of the semester. Almost 50% of the students responded which, given the fact that many of these student had already graduated, is a substantial response rate. Again, while students found the project to be challenging most of them feel it was of great benefit to them.

In the online survey, when students were asked to rate whether the project was worthwhile on a 1-5 scale, 9% said of moderate worth, 70% very worthwhile and 22% extremely worthwhile. When asked if they have or would use this in job interview situations 67% said they either were absolutely or very likely to use the PSP. When asked to rate which parts of the plan were the most valuable on a 1-5 scale (1 = no value and 5 = very valuable) surprising virtually all the components

were highly rated, but the number 1 item was assessing their competitive advantage. The rankings based on the ratings are presented below:

1.	Competitive advantage (mean)	4.83
2.	Core values/mission	4.70
3.	Personal strategies	4.39
4.	Life lessons	4.09
5.	Personal stakeholder analysis	3.91
6.	Environmental scanning	3.61

**Figure 6 : Typical Comments from Students on the PSP Project**

I thought it was a really good assignment because it made me stop and think about what plans, goals, etc. that I wanted in life. Many times we all get caught up in everyday life that we don't stop to think about plans for the future.
I think that assignment was great. The interview portion really prepared me for interviews and the SWOT and external analysis gave me great thoughts to share with my interviewers. It made me really think on it and grasp exactly what was the stakes in my life. I give it 4 thumbs up ;)
I really did get a lot out of the PSP, the SWOT and interview part especially. Breaking down my SWOT analysis really helped me understand what I needed to improve on before entering into the business world, plus we use SWOT charts here at the District
I'm graduating Saturday and will be unemployed most likely. Anyways, that assignment has definitely been beneficial to me. Analyzing myself throughout that project helped me think of many pros and cons I could use throughout interviews.
The PSP was a great tool to examine my strengths and weaknesses. I can work on improving my weaknesses, and my strengths are fresh in my mind to play those up during an interview.
The PSP was very good because I feel like it will really help me in the interview process because I am inexperienced in that area.
It was a very eye opening assignment, you really don't realize the extent of your skills and abilities until you take time to evaluate and write them down. I believe this is a very valuable tool of self-analysis.
From walking into an Advertising Agency with the PSP in hand with no reservation for an interview the owner talked to me right away. They were even offering to have me work for them for an internship, which was really cool to see.
I believe the PSP helped me in a way I have never done, sit down and think about not only my future but also my past and present. By looking at the people and experiences that have affected me throughout my life, I can better understand my strengths and core beliefs going forward into my own occupational life.
The PSP required me to evaluate myself in a way that I had not done before. It also helped me to catch up on current events that will affect my life which was both interesting and useful.
The Personal Strategic Plan was by far one of the best and most influential projects I have done in my college career. It has helped me strengthen academically, professionally, and has shaped my own views and belief of my true potential.
The PSP helped give me a better insight on my own desires in life by giving me the tools I needed to analyze different areas of where I am headed, where I have been and also how I have been influenced by my own personal experiences. I really enjoyed taking time to truly think through my life and how I can better live out my own mission statement and core values.
The PSP gave me great insight to what my core competencies are. While in the job search, I mentally and physically referenced the PSP quite often, linking relevant jobs to my SMART goals that coincide with core competency.

Reading these plans is both an affirming and humbling experience. Students very openly share their faith through their mission and vision statements. Their maturity, focus, and dedication to the Christian faith is reassuring to us as professors. For many of our students this exercise helps them to realize more fully where they have come from and the work of God in their lives. It also helps them more clearly focus on how God can use them in the future. We don't say this in a cavalier way-but even if the students did not benefit from this experience (which all the research shows that they do), we believe that the encouragement it gives to us as professors makes the experience well worthwhile. A couple of years ago one of us shared several of the best plans with both our Vice President for Academic Affairs and our University President. They were so impressed that they in turn shared them with the University's Board of Trustees.

### **CONCLUSION**

As we move forward in these complex times, we will continue to seek ways to more effectively teach Business Strategy. We will keep on integrating the business disciplines in the Strategy course. We will continue to address the ongoing theory and application debate. In our Christian institutions, we will carry on the discussion of how to best integrate faith and learning. In our teaching, we will be true to tested theories and also continue to learn and experiment and innovate. Ultimately, we want to send out well-prepared business graduates. We believe that these experiential approaches offered in this paper will help prepare them to step from classroom to workplace with well-placed confidence and self-assurance.

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**APPENDIX**  
**Mega Issues - A Sample of Recent Issues**

ISSUE	Comments
Aging U.S. Population	The United States is graying-what the impacts for business- how can companies take advantage of these?
America's technological leadership	Will we continue to lead the world in technology creation- why or why not?
Current financial crisis in housing and related credit crunch	Real or imagined threat- what is US government doing about it. ?
Bio and Genetic Engineering	What implications do this hold for our future? What are pros and cons?
Energy –oil & natural gas	Shot and long forecasts- are we running out of energy
Energy-alternative forms	What is the future-are they really the saving factor or just a pipe dream?
Global warming-is it real and can we do anything about it if it is?	What implications does it have for your life in the next 10-40 years- what opportunities does it present?
Globalization and its impact on America	What are positive and negative implications as it impacts your careers, companies and lifestyle over the next 10-20 years?
Growing power and influence of the Hispanic Population	Implications for business, marketing, taxation, border defenses.
Growing Power of Computer Technologies	Impacts they have in job loss/creation/redesign.
Inflation	Recent history, forecasts, implications.
Pension issues and the shift from defined benefit plans to 401(k) approach	Why are businesses doing this- is it a good or bad thing from your perspective?
Population redistribution to the South & Southwest	Will this trend continue and what are the implications for the country?
Rising power of Asia	Including China, India, Korea and other Tiger Economies.
Social Security System	Will it survive- what implications does the future of SS have for your parents and for YOU?
Tax overhaul – most popular proposals	For years there have been plans to overhaul or radically alter the present tax system to make it fairer and more incentive based.
Tort reform	Is there a lawsuit crisis in America? What should be done? Can it be done?
US Budget Deficit and National Debt	Distinguish between the two and explain possible implications.
US Trade deficit	What does this mean for the US economy and citizens?
World Population Growth	Will we peak and actually decline or was Malthusian economics right after-all?