The Past, Present, and Future of Business Education at Shippensburg University

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Shippensburg University, a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), is an institution of about 7,500 students (6,500 undergraduate; 1,000 graduate) and 300 full-time faculty located in the Cumberland Valley in South Central Pennsylvania. It was founded in 1871 as the Cumberland Valley Normal School and evolved through stages as a “state teachers’ college” and “state college” before achieving university status in 1983. In many ways, the challenges it faces today are typical of those faced by public institutions of higher education across the United States and especially of those located in regions characterized by slow population and economic growth. These difficulties are well-known and need not be enumerated here. However, one challenge confronting Shippensburg should be of particular interest to readers of this journal: an existential threat to its business education program — despite the fact that according to the National Business Education Association (NBEA), “a looming shortage of business teachers in the U.S. is reaching epic proportions” (NBEA, 2013).

Shippensburg University started offering a Bachelor of Science in Business Education and teacher certification in business for Pennsylvania secondary schools in 1938. At that time, the curriculum consisted of Bookkeeping, Secretarial, General Office, Business Operations, Retail Selling, and Teacher Education. Other courses included Mathematics, Business Law, Junior Business Training, Economic Geography, Economics, General Salesmanship, Typewriting and shorthand (see Appendix 1). In the same year, one L.E. Author, writing for the Shippensburg Teachers’ College Herald, described business education as “a field where many young people are eager to prepare” (1938, p. 3) and in which there was a shortage of business teachers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and other states in the Mid-Atlantic Region. The future of business education as a field of study and practice was bright.

The world, business education, and Shippensburg have gone through many changes since 1938. Shippensburg launched a masters’ degree in business education in 1962, which has long since been discontinued. The late sixties and early seventies saw the growth of the business education program into a School of Business and the introduction of Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) and MBA degree programs. In 1981, the BSBA at Shippensburg became the first business degree program among the 14 institutions of the Pennsylvania State System to be granted accreditation by the AACSB, becoming a member of what was then an exclusive club. In 1999, the Bachelor of Science in Business Education (BSED) was retired and replaced by a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) in Information Technology for Business Education (ITBE) with an optional teaching certification.

The new program featured a more comprehensive and rigorous business curriculum with increased emphasis on technology education. These changes were intended to better prepare business education teachers for the opportunities and challenges they would face as educators in the fast-paced, technologically advanced world of the 21st century. However, the updated curriculum requirements combined with the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s 3.00 cumulative GPA requirement for teaching certification made it more difficult for students interested in pursuing business education at Shippensburg University. ITBE remains housed in the College of Business, not in the College of Education, and the grade inflation that seemed to occur in the latter following the stated- mandated GPA requirement was not adopted by accounting, finance, ITBE or MIS professors. The combination of these and other external factors have contributed to the enrollment decline in Shippensburg University’s Business Education program.

THE CRISIS AND THE SURVEY

Teacher education programs across the country have seen a decline in enrollments (Erdley & Harris, 2013) due to budget cuts, teacher layoffs and limited employment opportunities in school districts. In Pennsylvania, the school age population
in the state is stagnant and the competition for teaching jobs is fierce. In the Pennsylvania State System, appropriations are vanishing and the threat of "retrenchment" hovers ominously over all low-enrolled programs. As a university, Shippensburg is dealing with the reduction of students in teacher education programs across the board, but business education seems especially hard hit.

In the past year, it became clear that it was time for a reassessment of the ITCE program. The future direction of business education at Shippensburg, if indeed it is to have a future, must be based on a sound understanding of the environment. Knowledge of the landscape and changes occurring in school districts is critical as we chart the future of business education at Shippensburg. With this in mind, we took a hard look at the school districts in South Central Pennsylvania where Shippensburg University has historically placed business teachers. Part of this look involved a survey of administrators asking questions related to expected retirements, vacancies, and other reasons that would lead to more hiring of business educators in the coming years, as well as to deeper concerns related to business education.

In January of 2014, electronic surveys, using Survey Monkey, were sent to 136 superintendents and principals in 66 different school districts. Two reminders were sent to survey participants, yielding a 46% response rate, with a total of 63 completed surveys received. The text of the brief six-question survey is presented in Appendix 2. Questions one through four addressed the present and future demand for secondary school teachers of business education. The districts responding currently employ 195 business teachers. Only 16% of respondents believed that more business teachers were needed. However, within the next three years, 95% of the districts anticipate at least one vacancy in business education and 70% intend to fill any vacancies. However, the most valuable and interesting information was yielded by question five.

Question five was an open-ended question, asking respondents about the greatest challenges faced by their business education departments. A content analysis of the responses yielded the following four categories: 1) budget constraints, 2) outdated curriculum, 3) perception of students, and 4) inability to find qualified candidates to fill positions. Figure 1 shows the number of responses for each of the four categories.

Limitations and Survey Questions

The data is limited by two factors, small sample size and some of the personnel that responded to the survey. First, the sample size is limited to only the 66 mostly rural districts in South Central Pennsylvania that were surveyed; and collectively these districts employ less than 200 business educators. In addition, several districts at the time of the survey had interim or new superintendents who may or may not have been familiar with the particulars of specific departments in their schools.

The questions asked on the survey were determined by the objectives of our research. Two key objectives were to determine how many business teachers were currently in the market place in our region, and of these how many planned on leaving within the next few years. A third factor was to determine the level of districts attrition and/or replacement rates as many teachers planned on leaving or retiring. Therefore, a question on the intent to fill the vacancies was required. Our department discussed and changed the questions several times. Our intent was to keep the survey questions concise and simple. The purpose of our research was clearly stated to our survey respondents, and we kept the language straightforward.

Analysis

The data from question five became the primary input into a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, (SWOT) analyses of the current position of business education in Shippensburg University's target market. Developing a better understanding of the landscape and the changes occurring in area school districts will allow us to determine how Shippensburg should best respond to market conditions.

Strengths. The main strength of business education in the target market area is its ability to adapt. Several districts have re-tooled and/or rebranded their business education programs. Some districts indicated that new teachers are being added and new curriculum is being taught. For example, business departments are "currently improving and updating their electives. Personal Finance has been added as a graduation requirement for the Class of 2018." Some districts are focused on teaching Entrepreneurship and Sports Marketing, which are subjects students enjoy. One district reported adding 'App Development' as a technology course for students to explore programming, a change from the standard emphasis on teaching Microsoft Office products and other computer applications. Some schools are even allowing students to
replace a year of math with half a year of Accounting and half a year of Entrepreneurship, because they believe this will help students with their endeavors after high school.

Weaknesses. Out-dated curriculum and "veteran" teachers were cited as the greatest weaknesses in Business Education in local school districts. Many schools reported they felt their curriculum is out of date. Several districts indicated that what was being taught was not current with the needs of the changing business world. Responses included that the curriculum has become "antiquated" and "stuck in a 20th century model of business education." It has been difficult to keep up with the evolution of content and the role of technology in many districts. The lack of innovation and relevancy has had a negative impact on the level of student interest in business education.

Business education is not marketed very well to students and teachers are failing to adjust curriculum to show relevance of their content areas. Several administrators in the target districts echoed this sentiment, "Teachers are not prepared to teach the business topics that will most benefit our students, especially in the areas of technology applications and 21st century business standards." Moreover, "getting our veteran teachers to see the need to change and get them to embrace more technology and offer a greater variety of relevant business education courses" continues to be a challenge. The teachers who are on staff need to keep current with cutting edge technologies; many do not know how to utilize engaging instructional strategies. One principal stated "I believe our teachers are not current with the curriculum offerings, nor do I believe that they are in touch with what the business community is expecting" of students. Some schools are having difficulty maintaining enrollments in their business departments because students do not see the relevance of the outdated curriculum to their lives and to future professional opportunities. There is also a perception that business is a non-academic tract and is not for college bound students.

Recruiting and motivating students to take high school business courses that do not foster their interest or curiosity is also a problem in schools. In addition, business courses must compete with remediation and Keystone courses (in Pennsylvania, the mandated end-of-course proficiency assessments in basic subjects are called Keystone Exams). The current job market is another weakness since many schools are not hiring at the present time, and low salaries in the education field are also an issue.

Opportunities. The major opportunity for business education is to make itself relevant again. The demand for the kind of knowledge that business education can provide is paramount and in order to provide it, business education can and must move into the 21st century. Curricular changes are needed in many school districts, but these much needed changes are possible as demonstrated by the districts reporting new and innovative approaches.

The most promising opportunity for business education is that jobs will emerge in the foreseeable future at the demographic level. The demand for teachers is cyclical. There has been an ice cold market in recent years for job seekers in states like Pennsylvania, but with large numbers of pending retirements, the market will once again become hot, and it appears there will be a shortage of qualified candidates. The retirement of change resistant, "veteran," teachers should open the field to new graduates who are prepared to return business education to a relevant and dynamic field.

Threats. Budget constraints were the top threat to the future of Business Education in schools. Districts reported that financial limitations due to poor state funding has hurt business programs and has in many cases, reduced their size and limited their expansion. The current economy and fiscal crisis in education in Pennsylvania was also cited as a threat.

Several districts have furloughed business teachers; therefore, they cannot offer business courses in their schools. Districts report that funding has been cut for technology and for the teaching staff overall. Attrition and not filling the positions vacated were common themes in several schools. "Doing more with less" was a shared theme repeated by survey participants.

Competition from Keystone classes has impacted demand for business education. Students need to pass the State exams, and they enroll in the Keystone classes to assist them in this endeavor, rather than taking business education courses as electives. In addition, the required 3.0 grade point average for all Education majors has contributed to the decline in the number of education majors in this field.

Current State of the ITBE Program at Shippensburg University

The primary strength of the ITBE program is the extensive background in information technology combined with the knowledge and skills developed from a wide array of business subjects received by our students. The training our recent ITBE graduates have received gives them the knowledge, skills, and the flexibility to respond to the opportunity for change and adaptation in the high school business education curricula. Indeed, they are well positioned to be change leaders in business education. They are well positioned in another way as well due to the Shippensburg's 75 year history of success by offering business education degrees to over 2,000 alumni. Since many of our alumni are currently teaching business courses in schools located throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, our new graduates are provided with a base of social capital that should stand them in good stead in the job market and as teachers leading curricular change.

An opportunity exists to improve and expand the secondary school business education curriculum. The University's ITBE program aligns well with the content changes and growing needs of technology education in school districts. Based upon the feedback received, there seems to be a disconnect between what is currently being taught in the high school business departments compared to what is being taught at the university level. Shippensburg University needs to be able to use its considerable resources to take advantage of the opportunity to help revitalize business education in the districts which are lagging behind the times.

Unfortunately, the ITBE program at Shippensburg is in the midst of a severe drought of students. In the fall of 2014,
only one student will be eligible to student teach and only ten students are currently pursuing an ITBE major. The 3.0 GPA requirement mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education for a teacher to be academically qualified is somewhat restrictive for our students. Strong business-oriented students see more lucrative and exciting opportunities in the business world than they do in secondary education. Strong students who are attracted to education as a career may not be attracted to business. Part of the problem may be related to the lingering perception of high school business education as a vocational training program for non-college-bound students.

**DISCUSSION**

It is a competitive landscape, and there is an opportunity to redesign and repackage the curriculum to make it more relevant and attractive to prospective students and to better prepare them for future opportunities. Students have more choices and many have outgrown the offerings in business programs in high schools. As a result of our analysis, we recommend setting up three different task forces comprised of both higher and secondary educators to help examine the issues presented.

- **A task force to help business programs in high schools re-brand/re-engineer their programs and image.** Business courses in high school are often associated with something that is no longer meaningful, relevant, or practical. The current field encompasses workforce development, career preparation, economic literacy, and life preparation. A challenge for educators is to make sure the business content remains relevant, prominent, and compelling (Kesten & Lambrecht, 2010). Many employers claim that workers do not have the required skills they need, causing a skills gap. A gap occurs because what is being taught is not considered relevant. Schools should focus on training approaches that offer a strong, well-articulated pathway to a career; blend classroom and work-based learning. This task force would be charged with (1) researching the target audience, competing business education programs, and current successful business education programs; (2) developing re-branding and re-engineering plans and implementation strategies, and (3) creating measurable and observable objectives to test the results of the rebrand. This task force would operate with assumption that rebranding will cost time and money and that students have changed. It is the job of this task force to determine how high school business programs can be made relevant again. Technological literacy has a profound impact on business education, although it is not limited to this field, but it needs to be looked at by the task force as well. Some of these may already be in place: internships, job rotations, apprenticeships and on-the-job training; but they should be looked at again to make sure the curriculum is meaningful to the worker because it is needed in the workplace. Still relevant to employers are life skills and soft skills (Eyster, Anderson & Durham, 2013). Life skills and soft skills are the interpersonal skills or characteristics that aid a person to function effectively in the workplace. Examples of this include showing up to work on time, dressing appropriately, being able to communicate verbally and in writing, and/or solving problems. The task force needs to make sure that these skills are included in the re-branding.

- **A task force to work with current business teachers.** The “Dream” task force for this group would be comprised of a wide range of different individuals. First, an individual from the Pennsylvania Department of Education specializing in curriculum in the business education field should be on the task force; as well as college and university faculty members with this expertise. Current administrators from the district and others including: other government agencies, community-based organizations, employers, and foundations. This task force would work with a model school(s) to help other districts develop their programs and devise in-service training for business teachers. Furthermore, the task force would aid them in re-branding and updating their curriculum and skills.

- **A task force to review the long term viability of Shippensburg University’s business education program.** The same type of individuals on the “Dream” task force should work on this as well as current business teachers in the market place should be on this task force. This task force would address questions such as: Are we teaching the most relevant courses? What should we keep about the current program and what should we change about the program? What are other successful programs doing? What are students looking for in a program? What is the best way to attract new students? Is there a demand for this program and should we explore the possibility of offering a master’s degree program in business education? What are successful districts looking for in a business education graduate?

**CONCLUSIONS**

Several conclusions were reached as a result of the survey. Shippensburg can change the perception of their Business Education program, and make the curriculum more germane. Many districts reported that they are offering both personal financial planning and entrepreneurship in their schools. Currently, these two classes are not required in the program to be a certified business teacher. Revision of the curriculum at the university level is needed to provide teacher certification candidates with the most current curriculum with matching personal financial planning and entrepreneurship. Shippensburg University was able to reinstate the post baccalaureate program for Business Education in the summer of 2014. The post-baccalaureate provides a pathway for graduates with a Bachelor's degree in business to obtain teacher certification by taking only the required course work for ITBE certification, which is two courses in the college of business and seven courses in education. In order to be pertinent and timely, Business education at
Shippensburg also needs to offer online and hybrid instruction for some of its courses, which are currently taught face to face. The online learning will increase access to training for students and provide them with skills working on computers and the internet, which are necessary for many jobs.

Another conclusion is that shifting political influences have had a negative impact on education budgets and this has tended to decrease the number of business education students and the ability of current higher education to meet needs for them.

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APPENDIX 1

Teacher Education Curriculum In
BUSINESS EDUCATION
(The sequence of subjects may be changed for administrative reasons)

Required courses on all sequences are indicated by the Semester hours
of Credit shown on the respective headings: "B" Bookkeeping, "S" Secretarial, and "R" Retail Selling; electives are shown by the asterisk (*).

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APPENDIX 2

Dear:

Shippensburg University is in the process of assessing present
and future demand for graduates of our Business Education
program, the B.S. B.A. In Information Technology for Business
Education with teaching certification. Currently, we are experiencing declining enrollments in this program. However, the
National Association for Business Teacher Education (NABTE) claims that a looming shortage of business teachers in the U. S.
is reaching epic proportions.

As a school district superintendent or secondary school principal in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the information you
could provide us is critical and would be greatly appreciated.
We ask that you complete a brief, six-question survey (link below) that will help us ascertain the landscape of need for Pennsylvania business teachers. Your input will be an important component of decisions we will make about the future
direction of Business Education at Shippensburg University. We thank you in advance for your time and effort.

1. How many business teachers are currently working in your school?
2. Within the next few years (1-3) do you anticipate any
   retirements or other vacancies in the business department?
3. Will you fill the vacancies in the business department?
4. Is there a need for more business teachers in your district?
5. What do you see as the greatest challenge to the business
departments in your school(s)?
6. Please enter your zip code.