Developing IB programs in community colleges, smaller universities: Why do it?

It’s a global world

Why should small colleges invest in developing international business programs? Jan Smith is very clear about the answer. “We live in a global world; students, faculty and employers need this kind of education,” she said, addressing a breakout session in which she and Kelly Jett Muphrey talked about internationalizing the curriculum at small colleges.

“It’s a disservice to our students if we don’t advance their knowledge in a global world,” said Smith, a principal with JMS Global and formerly director of international programs at Austin Community College.

She has a BA and MBA from the University of Texas at Austin and holds a CPA license. A program’s success depends on various factors. “It must meet well-defined needs, have support from the business community, commitment from the institution and faculty, and a cadre of champions among the staff.”

There are a number of steps to take before launching an IB program.

Needs-based

What skills/qualifications are businesses looking for when hiring? Do your students meet hiring needs or do they fall short of employer expectations in any area? What does the institution need to do to better prepare students to be fully employable? “Define the needs of businesses, students and school. This will enable you to develop a program that will serve the community’s interests and draw students.”

Business community

Is it future executives or technicians that are in demand in your local community? “This is something you’ll learn as you develop linkages with chambers of commerce; Sister Cities; the Small Business Development Center; economic development organizations; and local, regional and state agencies. It’s amazing the soft spot that business people have for students and you’ll find them eager to extend whatever support they can.”

Faculty

“Twenty years ago faculty didn’t have to know much about international business; today, faculty may be fearful and lack the competency to teach IB. Training and faculty development programs can help increase their comfort level and support.”

Smith said it is not necessary to “reinvent the wheel; research what similar institutions are doing. Ideas and support can be generated among academic organizations including CIBERs, NASBITE International (previously named National Association of Small Business International Trade Educators), CCID-Community Colleges for International Development, ACIIE-American Council on International Intercultural Education, NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

How you go about developing an IB program “depends on the needs of your college, students, faculty and business community. In matching needs with resources, IB will become more doable.

Academic program

While desirable, a separate academic program might not be viable “if you’re from a small college with a small student population. You need the numbers to justify a separate program.”

New courses

Add new courses to a current program if feasible.
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**IB components**

Infuse IB components into existing courses. This is a good option, Smith said, but there is a risk. Should the faculty member teaching the course leave, the IB component may be dropped by the next instructor. “Prepare for this possibility by working with the dean and department chairs to ensure that new faculty will support international business.”

**Noncredit programs/courses**

This is a reasonable alternative for students who want to explore international business at their own pace.

In considering your options, Smith stressed that “it’s not an either/or choice. It doesn’t have to be college credits or continuing education; it can be both.” The same holds true for study abroad programs versus domestic programs. “Students can acquire international skills at home or abroad; it doesn’t have to be one or the other. Look for hybrid programs and new methods to create something unique to your school.”

Internationalizing your school’s curriculum is a worthwhile endeavor. “Just do it,” Smith urged. “Get something started and continue to build on it.”

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**Global leaders needed**

Internationalizing the curriculum at small and community colleges is about accepting the challenge to develop global leaders,” said Kelly Jett Murphrey, associate director of outreach for the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) in the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University.

“We have an obligation to create a global mindset in our students and give them the skills and knowledge that they need.” He cited the value of an international business education from a national, corporate and student perspective.

- From a national perspective, IB enhances US competitiveness, creates jobs and reduces the trade deficit.
- From a company perspective, IB reduces dependence on domestic markets, increases sales and profits, stabilizes seasonal domestic market fluctuations and exposes executives to new ideas. “How can we compete in the world if we don’t create the ideas that are going to be cutting edge?”
- From a student’s perspective, IB creates greater employment opportunities along with better pay. “People who are involved in the global aspect of a business usually get paid higher than their colleagues,” said Murphrey. “They also have a better chance of getting a job.”

Students may be hesitant about embracing IB if they don’t understand what’s in it for them, Murphrey said. “That’s why we need to help them recognize the IB-job connection.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge for educators is to give students more than just a snapshot of international business.

“There’s so much students need to know if they’re going to be competent to work in a company with global interests. But there are only so many hours in which to learn and digest” what could be seen as an overwhelming amount of information.

Complicating the outlook is the lack of a distinct educational path students can follow as they pursue a career in international business. “If a student wants to become an accountant, there is a clear path to get there,” said Murphrey. “But international business has many aspects and a variety of paths to get there. Do we provide students with the big picture, an overview of the subject? Or do we provide a more focused approach geared to students’ specific goals? At this time, the path to a career in international business is unclear.”
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This may account for the confusion many students have about IB. “Students are getting different feedback and they are unsure if an IB degree – whether two-year or four-year – is something they will need and use on their job.” What is needed is “a game plan that would make the path clearer.”

“At least within your institution you have to decide on the path you want students to take and the skills you want them to master,” said Murphrey. “Then make sure they’re gaining those skills in different areas and different disciplines.”

Developing an IB program will take time and commitment. Unsure of where your support will come from? “Do a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) of the institution and a SWOT analysis of the region,” said Murphrey. “I think you’ll find you have an incredible amount of resources internally and externally, particularly if you’re willing to involve other disciplines. Even foreign students are resources.”

Murphrey urged educators to “get two-three other people involved in the process early on. I think you’ll find the impact will be quite strong and you’ll have more support for other activities you want to do.”

And to start molding that global mindset and create enthusiasm for IB, there are a number of things you can do right now, said Murphrey.

- Have students interview someone from a foreign country and discuss their findings in class.
- Form a journal/current events lunch group focused on global issues.
- Have students write to two foreign embassies for background material.
- Invite international business executives to speak in class. Record their talks if possible; they can become a resource for students and faculty.
- Review “Internationalizing the Business Curriculum: A Field Guide.” According to amazon.com, “The book will enable the interested administrator to strengthen the Business School by including the internationalization/globalization dimension. This will, in turn, give your students and tomorrow’s business leaders a better understanding of how to conduct business in a rapidly changing business environment.”
- Form an international business student organization and a “listserv” that automatically sends messages to your subscriber base and keeps them informed about events they might be interested in attending.
- Have students research two different countries and do a comparison of their economic, political and cultural environments.
- Log onto google.com for information on just about everything.

Said Murphrey, “Technology is changing the way we teach, the way students learn. Use it to your advantage.”