

Inside The Redesign Of Boston University's Undergraduate Business Program

👤 BY: JOHN A. BYRNE ON FEBRUARY 24, 2025 | 👁 1,438 VIEWS



Undergraduate Program Associate Dean Jeffrey Furman, Senior Associate Dean of Programs Barbara Bickart (top right), and Senior Associate Dean of Faculty Anita Carson led the curriculum overhaul that involved . more than 60 professors and staffers at BU Questrom School of Business

Overhauling the curriculum of a business school is highly challenging work. Professors invested in their courses often dig in to fight change if their class scheduled are altered or put completely on the chopping block.

Updating a business school curriculum typically requires multiple levels of approval from different stakeholders, including university officials outside the B-school. And then there are the inevitable student and market expectations to insure that grads leave the school with relevant skills for future employers.

That's why curriculum reform tends to be slow, incremental, and highly negotiated.

REDESIGNING QUESTROM'S UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

In the past three years, a trio of professors at Boston University's

Questrom School of Business (<https://poetsandquantsforundergrads.com/school-profile/boston-university-questrom-school-business/>) have been confronting these challenges and more in overhauling an undergraduate business curriculum for the first time in 30 years.

Associate Dean for the Undergraduate Program Jeffrey Furman, Senior Associate Dean of Programs Barbara Bickart, and Senior Associate Dean of the Faculty Anita Carson led the initiative. But more than 70 professors and staffers have worked on the redesign.

The result: A curriculum that doubles down on real world, job ready skills for students through a major expansion of experiential learning, a reshuffling of the sequence of courses to help students more easily land internships between their sophomore and junior years, and the embedding of more critical thinking and analytical skills throughout the curriculum. It is a redesign that will impact more than 2,300 students and 250 full-time faculty in Questrom's undergraduate business program, a highly selective **Top 20 experience (<https://poetsandquantsforundergrads.com/news/best-undergraduate-business-schools-of-2024/>)** that admits just 8% of its applicants. The school expects to roll out the new curriculum in the fall of 2025.

'THE FACULTY BELIEVED THAT WHAT WE WERE DELIVERING WAS IMPACTFUL FOR STUDENTS'

The dramatic changes involved losing an iconic part of the core undergraduate curriculum that had been a true innovation three decades ago. The four tightly-coordinated core courses—quantitative methods, finance, marketing and operations—were all taught together generally in a student's junior year, culminating in a required business plan for the launch of a new product. But the timing of those courses was out of sync with market expectations that put students at a disadvantage in competing for internships, and the capstone exercise had become stale and less challenging.

An earlier change initiative led by a faculty committee of ten professors came up short. The group identified problems and proposed some potential solutions but was unable to gain consensus. "Our faculty really believed that the then existing core was a gem because it was an integration among marketing, finance and operations and all that we taught the students in class could be leveraged for their projects," recalls Carson of the effort more than three years ago. "The faculty believed that

what we were delivering was really impactful for students. The concern was that we were dropping the best part of our undergraduate business program. But it was hard to update the curriculum because everything was tied to this project, and the projects started to get repetitive.”

The story of how Furman and his colleagues reengineered the program and lobbied to gain its approval is nothing less than a case study in change management. It involved the direct support and encouragement of Questrom Dean Susan Fournier, the building of trust that Furman had with his fellow faculty, and reams of benchmarking data and employer feedback. A strategy and innovation professor, Furman has been a steady fixture at Questrom for nearly 24 years, ever since earning his PhD at MIT Sloan. He is soft-spoken, personable yet driven, willing to invest the time and energy to gently twist arms and persuade the most change-resistant professors. If there was anyone on the faculty who could successfully lead a major overhaul, it had to be him.

THE DAY ONE READY COMMITTEE



Monica Parker James heads up Career & Alumni Engagement as an associate dean

He took the lead role in redesigning the first business course a freshman would take: Introduction to Business, Markets & Society.” Some 1,000 undergrads a year enroll in this course taught by 20 faculty members.

“That course changed almost completely from the Spring of 2024 to the Spring of 2025,” says Furman. “The theme of the course is business as a force for good, and it was designed as

part of a student quest to understand competition, markets and the role of business, all with the newly created Ravi K. Mehrotra Institute for

Business, Markets, and Society in mind. The redesign ended up with higher ratings than the earlier spring version.”

Dean Fournier had appointed a three-person committee co-led by Associate Dean Monica Parker James who heads up industry relations, career services, and alumni initiatives. Dubbed the Day One Ready committee, the group engaged a firm to do extensive research with alumni and employers. They did exit interviews with recently graduated students who often felt at a disadvantage in competing for internships because most of them were not being exposed to finance—the most popular concentration among Questrom undergrads taken by 60% of the students—until their junior year.

The Day One Ready committee set three primary goals for the redesign: To improve the rigor of the curriculum, increase its real world relevance to students, and boost the range of critical skills students would gain, from analysis and critical thinking to teaming and leadership.”

TRYING TO GIVE STUDENTS A GREATER SHORT AT EARLIER INTERNSHIPS

The upshot: “Students were taking finance too late because employers hire as early as sophomore year,” says Furman. “We also heard that students need to be better at unstructured problem solving because that is what people are expected to do from day one. A lot of what we were doing was too templated. The other thing was relevance. Alumni and employers told us that students need hands-on experience and should be embedded in real business today. It was nothing that was super surprising but we could see things were missing in the curriculum.”

Reengineering the UG: the Questrom Student Identity



An outline of the major goals of the redesign for Questrom’s undergraduate business program. Source: Boston University Questrom School of Business.

With that research in hand, Dean Fournier and Bickart engaged Carson to lead the next phase. Furman was then brought aboard as the new head of undergraduate programs. A smaller, close-knit group, they believed, could more easily come to agreement and then recruit more of the faculty in the redesign. “You want a small group of people making these decisions,” agrees Bickart. “A lot of people doesn’t help, and you need people who are not political.”

Carson took on a benchmarking project, looking at 52 undergraduate business programs at both peer schools and those ranked higher. She found that 70% of the programs allowed students to take finance in their freshman year. Programs also showed greater flexibility to choose courses with few to no prerequisites.

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Page 1 of 2 **1** **2** (<https://poetsandquantsforundergrads.com/news/inside-the-redesign-of-boston-universitys-undergraduate-business-program/2/>)

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Boston University's Questrom School of Business

'THE SCALES FELL OFF MY EYES'

"We were hamstringing our students by bundling finance into the core they took in their junior year," says Carson. "You couldn't take finance until you already had writing, business and society, micro finance, communication, organizational behavior, statistics, accounting, and accounting two. There were ten and one-half courses in four different layers before you took the core and got exposure to finance, marketing and operations. So many of our students weren't getting the most prestigious jobs or at the most prestigious companies in finance."

As Carson examined the benchmarking data in her home office, she recalls, "the scales fell off my eyes. Oh my gosh, it was really shocking. I lived in my own little world and I was focused on me teaching a class. I hadn't looked at the entire curriculum from a student's perspective and how the pieces fit together. We were so scripted in the pathway they had to travel that they didn't have the freedom to explore what they wanted. We were not allowing students to pursue their interests earlier. The benchmarking revealed it."

Even so, the team needed to convince the faculty to abandon a fundamental part of the undergraduate program. They had to persuade their colleagues that the core was no longer connected to what today's students needed. "the most exciting undergraduate programs were using that curriculum time to engage students on today's problems," explains Carson. "They were giving their students real world, hands-on experience."

'WE HAD BELIEFS ABOUT WHAT WE WERE DOING WHICH WEREN'T EXACTLY TRUE'

The research also overturned some other beliefs long held by the faculty.

"One of the biggest surprises is that we at Questrom often talk about us being a big school," adds Carson. "We are actually average. Some faculty said we were too big to do these things when in fact we were average sized. We had beliefs about what we were doing which weren't exactly true."

Other ideas also surfaced thanks to the benchmarking exercise. "We saw lots of exciting signature experiences but we also saw lots of examples of schools that did a better job of marketing their experiences," says Furman after looking closely at the benchmarking data. "We had a thoughtful approach of teaching teaming, but other schools would have highlighted that in a special way."

When the results of Carson's research were presented to the faculty in January of 2024, it was a true wake-up call. "The presentation was a turning point because some people saw we really do have a problem and need to change," says Bickart. Adds Furman, "When you show people what it is you want to move away from, they would more likely resist. We also showed from benchmarking what other schools do for signature experiences."

ORGANIZING A NEW CURRICULUM AROUND FIVE QUESTS

It was now time to get far more people engaged in the change effort. The trio leveraged their presentation to sign up 70 faculty members and staffers to come up with with solutions. After all, reasoned Furman, "the people who design the new courses are the ones who will have to teach them. We needed their buy-in."

They recruited a coach, Ray Angelone, to help with an agile approach to guide the group to new thinking about a curriculum that would enable greater depth and flexibility and the time for students to dive deep into a

specific discipline. To meet market demands, they sought to up the amount of time devoted to analytics and modeling. Students would have the option of taking finance, marketing, and or operations management courses in their sophomore year, a change that allowed them to pursue intro courses in the order that matches their interests. That shift in scheduling also gave students more time to take several of the ten advanced electives in finance, a portfolio that will be expanded to include new courses in wealth management and real estate finance.

The group decided to organize the new curriculum around five “quests,” all of which would be drilled into students via courses, experiences, and across the curriculum: critical and innovative thinking, analytics, teaming and leadership, and competition and the global business context. The school already added an artificial intelligence module in an information systems course and is considering a new AI course that could be taken in place of the more general info systems classes. Questrom also has been holding bi-monthly sessions for faculty on how to leverage AI for teaching.

ADDING REQUIRED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECTS

To satisfy alumni and employer recommendations to get students to work on real projects, the group went about creating new signature experiences that would give students real world experience they could talk about in job interviews.

The group settled on three required experiential learning assignments for every undergraduate business student: a 14-week-long action learning innovation course with a well-known Boston metro company, such as Gillette, New Balance, or Dunkin’ Donuts. There would also be a global business immersion with a project, and finally another experiential learning course in a student’s concentration. The school would have to devote substantially more resources to deliver on what would now be required action learning assignments with real organizations.

“Critical and analytical thinking for business is introduced in a course they will take in their first or second year,” explains Furman. “It gives students a framework for hypothesis and deductive reasoning, and then the framework gets applied in the sophomore innovation project (see table below).”

The trio met privately with faculty throughout the process, insuring that no one felt excluded from the change effort. Last spring, the faculty voted its approval on the outline of the redesign along with roughly two-thirds of the

changes, including the decision to decouple the once sacred core, approve the innovation course with its required experiential learning project, and lab courses in specific concentrations that would add more required active learning assignments.

Critical conceptual & practical skills ("Real World Ready Skills") will be developed & deepened across the required curriculum				
Intellectual Arc ("Quest")	I. Introduce Key Frameworks (In Foundations Courses)	II. Reinforce Frameworks (In real-world projects)	III. Expand Frameworks (In Fundamentals & Concentration Courses) <small>(examples of potential courses that could build upon key frameworks)</small>	IV. Apply Expanded Frameworks (In Lab Courses)
1. Critical & Innovative Thinking	SM275	Innovation Project (XP298)	MK223 e.g., OM353 (Project Management)	Action-Learning Lab Courses (XP###)
2. Analytics & Modeling (dealing with messy data)	BA221		QM222/BA222 e.g., MK223 e.g., FE429 (Futures, Options, & Risk)	
3. Teaming & Leadership	MO221		OM223 e.g., SI451 (Organizing for Design & Innov)	
4. Competition & Global Business Context	SM131 <small>Micro/Macroeconomics</small>		LA245 e.g., SI422 e.g., FE342 (Money, Fin Markets, & Ec Activity)	

Source: Boston University Questrom School of Business

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

None of this was easy. The innovation course alone would require faculty oversight of more than 130 teams of students at a time, with 800 undergraduates divided into groups of five or six students. Each of the school’s 13 concentrations would have to sign up companies for the additional 14-week-long action learning projects. With 400 students a year in finance, Questrom would have to find organizations to support 20 projects alone. Corporate sponsors would have to be enlisted and agree to be present for the inevitable student presentations. The school also would have to recruit and hire more staffers to handle the logistics of this and other action learning projects. Question currently has one staff member and a faculty leader dedicated to experiential learning. It would need a support staff of four or five people and more faculty resources. Besides, some profs were skeptical of putting students in an experiential course without having had either finance or marketing.

Furman and his colleagues made sure to invite the professors in the core to create the experiential course. They then put on a committee several professors in their strategy and innovation group who would help their colleagues overcome concerns about the lack of prerequisites.

At a critical faculty meeting in May of last year, Furman got up before his colleagues and made the pitch for the changes.

UNEXPECTED OPPOSITION TO THE CHANGES AT CRITICAL FACULTY MEETING

"The crowd loves Jeff because people trust him," says Carson. "We are feeling that it is going great."

And then the discussion opened up. One professor, who had previously supported the change effort, got up to say the changes were too ambitious and would be difficult to pull off. He suggested making the course an elective and learning from it before putting it in the required curriculum.

"Don't commit to action learning for everyone," he argued. "Cut that out."

His objections were a shock to the trio because they all assumed he would approve the redesign without reservation. No less important, he was a highly respected member of the faculty who has been teaching at Questrom for more than three decades.

THE FACULTY VOTE: NEARLY UNANIMOUS WITH ONE OBJECTION & TWO ABSENTIONS

Immediately, however, other professors who teach in the core argued against exercising caution. "We need to do this and if we take a pass now we will never have the organizational will power to do this change," he said.

A vote was taken among the roughly 120 faculty members in the meeting. The vote was nearly unanimous, with only one professor against the change and two abstentions.

The change team was relieved. "Many people have worked on this proposal," says Furman. "One of the brilliant things was to involve as many people as possible. That built momentum. Part of the reason people embraced this is because they understood the needs of the students and believed in the strategic vision. The only compensation that any of us got were water bottles."

'THE RACE IS JUST BEGINNING. NOW IT'S TIME FOR IMPLEMENTATION'

Still, one sticking point remained: Which classes would no longer be required to make room for the changes. Most likely they would be managerial accounting, a third quantitative methods course, and one of a non-Questrom class. In October, the faculty met again to finalize the curriculum and to agree to drop managerial accounting as a required course. Only one professor voted against it. The faculty also voted to drop

one of three quantitative methods courses that had been created to serve the old core.

“It was a big deal,” remembers Carson. “It has been such a long haul that the meeting had been anti-climatic.”

The trio is not yet ready to celebrate, but is clearly pleased with what they have accomplished. “I personally think we will leap ahead of the other schools,” believes Bickart. “What we’ve done is to integrate the curriculum end to end to get students multiple touchpoint to work with businesses.”

The university will soon vote on the redesign so that the faculty will begin the roll out of the new program this fall.

“The race is just beginning,” laughs Furman. “Now it’s time for implementation.”

DON’T MISS: Best Practice: An Unusual Career Innovation Helps Questrom Students Land The Jobs They Want (https://poetsandquants.com/2024/05/15/questrom-career-services/?__hstc=148638376.e8a2572d13d40becf98ac6b58a948d22.1740067944423.1740759335356.1740777180067.3&__hssc=148638376.1.1740777180067&__hsfp=378030566) or Questrom Dean Susan Fournier On The Future Of Business Education (https://youtu.be/nFeIEg5X_6g?si=spozAAdvz_6sRbDT)

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