

Best Practices

The “Senior Blessing” at Abilene Christian University’s College of Business Administration

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Introduction

The mission of Abilene Christian University (ACU) is to “educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world.” The university community takes this mission seriously as do we in the College of Business Administration (COBA). Not unlike most Christian business schools, we try to implement our mission by integrating faith and learning in various ways throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum. For example, we attempt to teach the various business disciplines from a Christian worldview, and many professors begin each class session by asking for the Lord’s blessing on the class. In addition, the university has a daily chapel service that is mandatory for undergraduate students. Once a month, we have a specialized COBA chapel that is organized by students in the College of Business. Both COBA faculty and

students have served as speakers during the last year. In addition to these fairly typical attempts at biblical integration, we will describe in detail in this paper one unique co-curricular activity that serves as a capstone of our attempts to integrate faith and learning. This activity is called the “Senior Blessing.”¹

The Senior Blessing is an annual event in the ACU College of Business that started in 1994. It is an all-day activity that typically occurs on a Tuesday or Wednesday during the month of April. All the seniors in the College of Business are invited to attend this special event. All COBA classes are cancelled on the Senior Blessing day, and the entire COBA faculty and all the seniors who are able to attend carpool to a retreat site approximately 45 minutes from the campus. In the following paragraphs, we will describe the three primary objectives (the

ABCs) of the day. The ABCs are admonition, blessing, and celebration, respectively. Our discussion will begin with the celebration aspect of the event. The paper then concludes with a description of various administrative issues relating to the planning of this special day, a discussion of outcomes assessment, and some summary comments.

Celebration and Coronation

We in the College of Business view this day as a day of celebration and coronation. We want to celebrate our students' upcoming graduation and their entrance into the marketplace. We also want to celebrate and strengthen the relationships that have been formed over the past four years. We feel it is important to get away from the campus atmosphere of classrooms, labs, and libraries for this day of celebration. This is a day filled with opportunities for our students to fellowship with the faculty and other students.

The first activities of the day celebrate our relationships with each other. To begin the day, students and faculty share a meal together and enjoy a time of casual conversation.

After breakfast, the program moves outside for some mixer-type activities and/or team-building exercises. This is a time in which students enjoy being with their friends and the faculty. It is also a time for the students to relish the possibilities for faculty members to embarrass themselves.

Another opportunity for fellowship during the day is a period of free time after lunch. During this time, it is common to see professors and students throwing footballs or Frisbees or to see students and teachers exploring the beauty of God's creation at the riverside retreat area. In addition to recreation activities, we typically break into small discussion groups twice during the day. One group session is set aside to reflect on the day's speakers and activities. The other discussion session is used for an open question and answer period. During this period, students are welcome to ask faculty members and speakers questions on any subject. There is often discussion in these groups of what it means to enter the world of business as a Christian, how to balance work and family time, and how to be an effective witness for Christ. These sessions are a celebration of the mutual trust and respect

shared by students and faculty. Still another key activity of celebration on this day is a time of collective devotion and worship in which students and faculty participate in singing, praying, and reading Scripture.

In summary, a critical aspect of the Senior Blessing is the celebration of the relationships that have been formed over the past four years. This time of celebration is beneficial to both students and faculty in that we are able to see each other in a different light on this special day as we celebrate our common bond of faith.

Admonition

The Senior Blessing is also a day of admonition. This is a day where the graduating seniors are reminded that being a committed Christian and a successful businessperson are not mutually exclusive goals. The students are admonished to put their focus on Jesus Christ and not on worldly fame, power, or wealth. As stated previously, this day is intended to serve as a capstone for all of our efforts to integrate faith and learning in the curriculum and co-curriculum. Therefore, our students should have heard such admonitions frequently during their time in the College of

Business. However, we feel that a strong encouragement to take to heart eternal matters is periodically needed by all Christians and is especially relevant for a student making his or her initial entrance into the marketplace.

In addition to admonitions from the faculty, it is our custom to bring in one or two guest speakers each year. The typical guest speaker is a successful businessperson who has also successfully balanced faith, family, and career. Such speakers are qualified to speak to graduating seniors about setting priorities and being a positive influence in the workplace.

In the invitation that we send out to each senior student, we describe the role of the guest speakers as follows: "We continue to attract highly successful business leaders to share with you their heart for God, proven methods of meeting the demands of business, the foundations of high-quality family life, and strategies to deal with ethical and moral issues that challenge each of us."

Previous guest speakers have included senior corporate officers, business owners, husband and wife teams, and sometimes even an entire family. The speakers respond favorably

to the students' eager desire to learn. The speakers are very open in sharing their struggles as well as their successes in faith and in business. Their stories tell of the tension of trying to be in control of your life and business while being submissive to God's leading. The guest speakers provide models of discipline and integrity as they talk about hard work and how to manage life's demands. Their messages are extremely realistic in that they often speak about business failures and their personal shortcomings.

Our speakers are essential to the success of our day of blessing. They bring credibility and encouragement with their experiences. The encouragement portion of the day is vital in that we want our graduating students to fulfill God's purpose in their lives. Again, quoting from the invitation to the seniors, "Our mission and your preparation have been built upon the firm belief that God, in His infinite wisdom, has crafted a plan for you. His plan for you, as a business professional, is to bring Him glory and honor in all that you do." In summary, the admonition is for the graduating seniors to remember that eternal issues are of much greater

importance than career and/or financial success. We stress this point because we firmly embrace the following words of Jesus: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

The Blessing

As the name indicates, a major component of the Senior Blessing day is when we as a faculty send the graduating students off with our blessing. The blessings we deliver to the graduating seniors are patterned after various blessings delivered in the Old Testament. For example, in Genesis 49, Jacob (Israel) pronounced a blessing on his 12 sons. In Deuteronomy 33, Moses pronounced a blessing on the Israelites before his death. To give a New Testament example (Luke 24:50-51), Jesus blessed his disciples before his ascension into heaven. It is our goal to pronounce blessings of this type on our students as they leave us and embark on their careers.

In their book *The Blessing*, authors Gary Smalley and John Trent identify five common elements of blessings found in the Scriptures. These elements are:

1. Meaningful Touch
2. A Spoken Message
3. Attaching "High Value" to the One Being Blessed
4. Picturing a Special Future for the One Being Blessed
5. An Active Commitment to Fulfill the Blessing.

Our goal, of course, is to incorporate these elements of blessing into our students' experiences throughout their time in the College of Business. In the following paragraphs, we describe how we attempt to reinforce each of these five elements during the Senior Blessing.

Meaningful Touch

Meaningful touch is a sign of the close relationships we try to build with our students. It is difficult to estimate the significance of appropriate physical touch that communicates acceptance and encouragement. On this day, meaningful touch may occur when we link arms during a team-building exercise. A simple slap on the back after a long touchdown pass is another example of meaningful touch. It is also present in welcoming handshakes and farewell hugs. Meaningful touch is felt while hands are clasped together during

the devotional prayer and is specifically called for when we encircle the students while a spoken blessing is given to them.

A Spoken Message

The spoken blessing is the final highlight of the day. A different faculty member delivers the blessing each year, and the tenor of the blessing varies with the individual

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delivering it. In order to illustrate such variations, we next provide a verbatim transcript of the blessings delivered in 1998 by Accounting Professor Bill Fowler and in 1999 by Marketing Professor Ed Timmerman.

Senior Blessing
April 14, 1998
By Bill Fowler

Father, our prayer and our blessing this day is simple:

Help us to be more like Jesus every day.

Teach us to see people through the eyes of the Spirit and not the eyes of the flesh.

Let us carry about daily in our life the death of Jesus so that we will not be so selfish.

Give us circumstances, Father, which build our trust in You and not our understanding in ourselves.

Focus us, Father, not on the external things of this world, not on the things we want to do, not on the circumstances we want to change, but focus us on *Your power and Your Spirit* that is at work within us to change us from the inside.

Help us, Lord! We acknowledge so much conflict in our values ...

We are eager for gain and for victory. Teach us about losing our life.

We want to be in control all of the time. Teach us the peace of surrender.

We measure ourselves so much by getting. Teach us the completeness of giving.

We constantly look for happiness. Show us the wholeness that comes from mourning and sorrow.

We work hard to be strong and self-reliant. Remind us of Your sovereignty and of Your abiding care for us through circumstances which bring about brokenness and emptiness.

God, we always want an answer. Teach us humility and patience in those times when we don't even know the questions to ask.

God, we are intent on understanding. We *so* dislike uncertainty. Teach us to trust completely in You.

Lord, we become exasperated, stressed, and depressed because our lives are focused on the present, on the immediate. Teach us and encourage us through the hope of eternal life.

God, we have so many works we want to do. Remind us that we are Your work, created in Christ Jesus for Your purposes.

Lord, we want very much to love and be loved. The world would have us believe that it is just fun and sweet, that it is easy and without commitment. God, You are Love. You are Truth. We ask that you teach us the value *and the cost* of godly love. We ask this knowing that You will bring into our lives people who are difficult to love and situations which we may not like or cannot change. We know that You will guide us and be patient with us as we learn that godly love comes not because someone is lovable, but because we allow ourselves to be changed into your image.

Father, our whole prayer, our request for blessing is that we would be consumed by Your love and Your power and Your spirit at work within us. Fill us completely, wholly, purely, to overflowing with Your presence. We ask, God, as the God of Eternity, as the God of peace, that You will sanctify us through and through. We ask knowing that You are the One who calls us, knowing that You are faithful, and You will do it.

The Blessing
April 13, 1999
By Ed Timmerman

[We want to lay our hands upon you ... as we extend our blessing to you ... and since we cannot do this with every person here ... we ask that you join hands and allow the blessing that we offer to flow within you as a conduit to each other.]

The faculty, administration, and staff of the College of Business Administration at Abilene Christian University ... offer you our blessing.

You were ... made in the image of God ...
you are born to a purpose by His divine will ...
you have been intentionally educated to become a blessing to others ...
you are our message written not on tablets, but on the heart ...
you are God's ambassador to a defective world ...
you have an eternal destiny to fulfill ...
you have an eternal home to inherit.

We are so very proud of you ... for your abilities and skills ... but most of all for your hearts for service. You have made a good name for yourselves as you've served this community in your time here.

We are glad that we could participate for this short time in your lives ... that you tolerated the assignments, the deadlines, the pushing, the discipline ... realizing that it was only out of concern for you that we tried to extract your best effort. We are honored to have a group of your quality and demeanor and dedication to leave here and represent us.

We can already tell that you are destined for great things. Not all of you will occupy powerful positions or acquire great wealth or

be highly influential ... but all of you *will* do great things. You will do the greatest things of all if you remain true to God's truth ... if you deal honestly and talk truthfully ... always be truthful. You will do the greatest things of all if you keep faith with your mate ... if you attend to the spiritual needs of your children ... if you nurture your friendships ... if you become caring leaders and faithful followers in your church.

You are a blessing to us and you are worthy of our blessing.

Professor Fowler's blessing is an appeal to God to "help us to be more like Jesus every day," and a plea for God to "fill us completely, wholly, purely, to overflowing with Your presence." By contrast, Professor Timmerman's blessing is directed at the graduating seniors rather than to God. Much of his message parallels the admonitions discussed previously. Specifically, his message to the students is that "you will do the greatest things of all if you remain true to God's truth."

Attaching "High Value" to the One Being Blessed

We strive to incorporate this blessing element in all of our contacts with our students. However, on this day in particular, we want our students to feel honored and valued.

The significant amount of time spent in planning this day of blessing, the time commitment from our speakers, and even the cancelling of a day's classes all contribute to communicating to our students the value that we place on them. In addition, faculty often express that the opportunity to know and influence students is their primary purpose in teaching at ACU. Such statements also serve to affirm the high value we give to our students.

Picturing a Special Future for the One Being Blessed

The future is very much on the minds of students at the Blessing. It is one of the primary reasons that we wait until late spring for the Blessing. Most of our senior students will graduate within a month of the Senior

Blessing, and their minds are often occupied with the realities of starting a new job or with anxieties about finding a job. Some are busy planning weddings and still others are anxious about finding a future spouse. Most of the students are anticipating moving to new cities, and they are beginning to realize that this unique time of college friendships is drawing to a close. A major concern for many of these graduating seniors is the realization that their competencies and their faith will soon be tested in new ways. The Senior Blessing is designed specifically to give students confidence that they do indeed have a special future.

An Active Commitment to Fulfill the Blessing

Students should leave the activities of this day knowing that there are various sources of commitment to fulfill the Blessing. Throughout the day, faculty members have given reassurances of student readiness and have reiterated their willingness to help students after graduation. In addition, the guest speakers have either individually expressed their desire to mentor students or have served as excellent examples of Christians in the marketplace. Above all, we

want our students to acknowledge and be comforted by God's commitment to them to fulfill the blessing. We rejoice with them as we consider God's word to Jeremiah: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart'" (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

Seeking God's blessing is a natural outcome of a Christian's trust in God. In his book *The Prayer of Jabez*, Bruce Wilkinson extols the faith of Jabez, who prayed to God, "Oh, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory!" (I Chronicles 4:10). Wilkinson explains, "When we ask for God's blessing, we're not asking for more of what we could get for ourselves. We're crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God has the power to know about or give to us." We want our students to recognize God's commitment to bless them and for them to live with the conviction expressed by the writer in Proverbs who exclaims, "The blessing of the Lord makes

rich, and he adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

Administrative Issues

The Senior Blessing requires considerable effort on the part of many people. For example, the speakers make a large commitment of their time to prepare their comments, and they commit their own financial resources to come to this event. Additionally, the retreat center must be reserved and the day coordinated with the speakers' availability. The agenda must also be planned, and program participants must be selected. Menus for meals must be chosen, and snacks for break times must be purchased as well. Still other administrative tasks include the mailing of invitations and brochures to the seniors and the mailing of letters to their parents announcing the event and requesting prayers. Indications of student attendance must also be collected before the event so that discussion groups can be arranged in advance. In addition, the Senior Blessing must be publicized beyond the mailing of invitations and brochures. We have discovered means of effective additional publicity are the posting of notices about the event throughout the COBA

building and the making of classroom announcements. A final administrative task involves the planning of the time of devotion and the discussion sessions. In summary, in order for the Senior Blessing to be a success, there are many activities to plan and there is much to pray about.

Outcomes Assessment

How do we determine if the Blessing is meeting its objectives? Measuring outcomes in an endeavor like this is difficult since the desired outcomes are future-oriented and are so personal in nature. Since the Blessing is a voluntary event, we can use attendance to at least suggest student acceptance of and support for the event. We have averaged about 100 students for the Blessings, which represents about 50 percent of our seniors. We would like for this percentage to be higher, but several factors impede its growth. Many students work and cannot take an entire day off for the Blessing. The distance of the retreat site from the campus discourages partial day attendance. Still other students use the day to complete class projects and assignments, and some others struggle with the early 7:30 a.m. departure time.

Student feedback from prior Blessings has been positive. We collect evaluation forms and student comments each year. The students' comments typically express appreciation for the speakers, for the time shared with faculty out of the classroom, and for the opportunity to have a day set aside to celebrate their time in the College of Business. For example, one student commented after the Blessing in April 2000, "The Senior Blessing is the perfect experience to mark the end of your ACU career. In my four years in COBA, the faculty and staff have not only been my teachers, but also my mentors and my friends. It is hard to believe that you can learn so much about yourself in one day." We hope to identify more specific and measurable outcomes in the future as we improve our alumni surveys and other assessment tools. In the meantime, we are content to plant the seeds and wait for God to give the increase.

Conclusions

The Senior Blessing in the College of Business Administration at Abilene Christian University is intended to serve as the capstone of our efforts to integrate faith and learning. In a recent issue of the

ACU COBA alumni magazine *Business Interface*, COBA Dean Rick Lytle stated, "The Senior Blessing is where we take our seniors out one last time and say, 'If you missed this the four years you were here, your faith in God is the most important variable of your life.'" We as a faculty obviously hope our students have not missed this vital point in their four years with us, and we are continually striving to integrate faith and learning more and more throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum. However, even if a student has observed this message being lived out in the lives and teachings of the faculty, we feel that the taking of this special day at the conclusion of the students' undergraduate education underscores the eternal significance of our call to "educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world."

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ENDNOTES

¹Another description of the Senior Blessing may be found in Timmerman, Winegeart, and Lytle (1999).

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