

A Conceptual Model for Developing Future-Ready Business Leaders: Insights from a Business Honors Cohort Program

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Abstract

This conceptual paper proposes an integrated model for preparing future-ready undergraduate business students, drawing on five years of implementation of a business honors cohort program at Kansas State University, a large public research university in the Midwestern United States. The program combines a cohort-based academic structure, early professional development, applied learning experiences, executive mentoring, and an ethical business framework to strengthen leadership capacity and career readiness. Students complete five courses together in their first year, including Introduction to Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Introduction to Leadership Concepts, Business and Society, a business orientation seminar, and an early Career Accelerator course. This shared curriculum supports academic community, interdisciplinary thinking, and early engagement with professional expectations. Additional components include pairing each student with an executive mentor for at least six months, early access to career development services, structured networking and interview preparation, and corporate engagement activities. Preliminary observations from the Menard Family Scholars Program indicate that this model contributes to increased confidence, early career clarity, strong internship attainment, and high engagement in applied learning experiences, with alumni demonstrating positive employment outcomes. This paper positions the business honors cohort model as a framework for integrating academic, co-curricular, and applied learning elements to support leadership development, ethical decision-making, and long-term career success in a rapidly changing global business environment.