



# marketing style

STUDENTS GAIN HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH NATIONAL RETAILER

By Sue Spence

Imagine being three-fourths of the way through the semester and working hard on the final project. When you arrive at class you learn the due date must move up one full week.

Time to sweat? Maybe a little.

Time to panic? Not for the 15 students who enrolled in an immersive learning program through the Miller College of Business. For them, it was just another day at the office.

These students spent the fall 2007 semester living and learning the curriculum in the core courses Principles of Marketing and Managing Behavior in Organizations. With guidance from Rod Davis, interim dean and professor, and Jennifer Bott, assistant professor of management, the students worked as consultants for Vera Brad-

ley, a Fort Wayne, Indiana-based company internationally known for its distinctive, quilted luggage, handbags, and accessories, to create grand-opening plans for three of the company's new signature stores.

As they had all semester, the students accepted the change in plans, adapted to their new deadline, and "worked their tails off," according to one student, to have their presentations polished and ready to meet with the company's cofounder, Patricia Miller, and public relations executive, Melissa Cordial. One group even reserved a room at Bracken Library each night until it completed the project.

"The presentations were professional, using technology for which Ball State is renowned," Cordial says. "The feedback we received was impressive, and we have

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Davis and Bott used a \$24,450 university one-year Discovery Grant to pilot the program during the 2007-08 academic year. “We told the students this was experimental and fluid but that’s real life,” Davis says. “You have a schedule, but then your boss tells you your project is no longer due next week it’s due this week.”

For junior marketing major Nicole Schultz, coping with the constantly changing schedule was just one more way the experience helped prepare her and her fellow students for the business world outside college. “In the real world, there is no syllabus to tell you what happens day to day,” she says.

#### ADVENTURES IN BUSINESS

From the beginning, Davis and Bott worked hard to have the program closely mirror the business world.

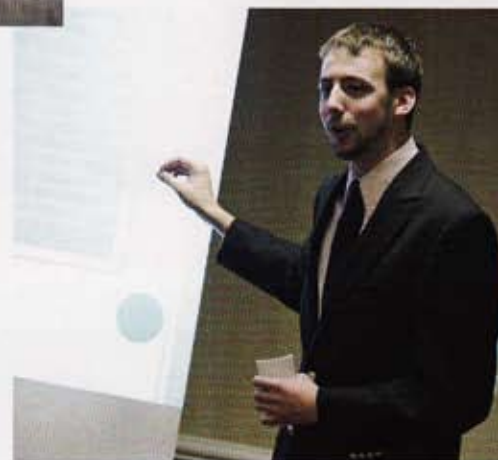
“Ball State approached us to see if there was a need for an interactive program where students could be involved in helping our company in the business realm,” said Cordial, of Vera Bradley. “Knowing about the amazing success of Ball State’s entrepreneurship program and the Miller College of Business, we jumped at the chance to have a fresh perspective from outside Vera Bradley.”

Students had to apply to participate in the program.

Students’ responsiveness to e-mail requests for information and their ability to turn in required material by a deadline helped determine whether they got a spot in the class.

Once in the class, the students formed three teams. Each team had only one member from a particular major such as finance, accounting, or human resources. Students said this structure enhanced their learning opportunities.

“Being able to work with students from different majors allowed us to see how all departments are important to the success of a



**Clockwise from top:** Jennifer Bott, assistant professor of management, discusses the Ball State immersive learning program with Vera Bradley officials. Ball State student Shannon Terrell speaks to Vera Bradley representatives in Oak Brook, Illinois, concerning grand opening plans she helped create for the company’s new stores. Justin Sieb, a junior majoring in finance and accounting, speaks to Vera Bradley representatives. He noted that the immersive learning experience allowed classroom “concepts in action right in front of us.”

Patricia Miller, Vera Bradley cofounder, and Rod Davis, interim dean of the Miller College of Business, react to a student’s presentation.



**This page, from top to bottom:** Heather Baumgartner, Ball State student, speaks to Vera Bradley representatives in Oak Brook, Illinois. Patricia Miller, Vera Bradley cofounder, converses with Ball State students following their presentation on her company, Vera Bradley products.



in human resources, operations, brand standards, public relations, and quality control to learn how the individual areas contributed to the company's overall success. They also traveled to the Carmel, Indiana, store, and they visited the Oak Brook, Illinois, store after their presentations.

"Any time we interacted with anyone from the company, we used that opportunity to teach some of the management curriculum," Bott says. "Vera Bradley has an organizational culture that reflects the vision of the cofounders, and it is focused on the little things they do to make people feel valued." She noted that a few of the company's perks include an on-site fitness center with a personal trainer, yoga classes, and on-site chef.

The group's visit to the Vera Bradley distribution center made the retail distribution process come alive for Sieb. "We were able to read the chapters and then go out and see the concepts in action right in front of us," Sieb says. "It's amazing that something so complicated can happen that fast."

Schultz says: "This experience allowed us to see how all the concepts we are taught actually apply to a company. The concepts were no longer concepts...we made them realities."

#### PATHWAY TOWARD SUCCESS

Typically, the marketing principles classes are taught as lectures with 50 to 60 students. Every business major must take both courses. As Bott and Davis adapted the curriculum for the immersive learning program, they made sure that the students covered the required topics. They included lectures on some material. Students learned some of the information while they worked on their projects. Interactions with Vera Bradley provided the rest.

"These students were immersed in a corporate culture, a retail environment, and event-strategy planning all at the same time," Cordial says. "How well prepared these students will be for the future!"

During the semester, students completed project assignments as well as covered certain sections in their textbooks. They did a research paper about Vera Bradley, developed a market analysis of their assigned city, and created a list of store opening-event recommendations. The final project: a 30-minute presentation to company officials at a Chicago-area hotel.



### ANOTHER BIG OPPORTUNITY

During the spring 2008 semester, students enrolled in Principles of Marketing and Managing Behavior in Organizations worked directly with the Indianapolis Indians. They developed plans for the team to highlight its baseball heritage and history throughout Victory Field in downtown Indianapolis.

company," Schultz says.

"In any business career, people will have to work in a group at some point," says Justin Sieb, a junior majoring in finance and accounting. "This type of team experience will not only help us in our future business careers but also in our future encounters with other people in the world."

Briana Stone, a junior majoring in accounting, agrees. "Each person brought

something very different to the team. Some of us were very nervous about public speaking, and some team members loved to get up and talk. The ones who loved to talk gave the rest of us confidence because we all had to speak during the final presentation."

The students visited Vera Bradley's headquarters twice and met with representatives

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“We gave them a budget and asked them to drive people into the stores for the opening event as well as entice consumers to return to shop at a later date,” says Cordial, who visited students on campus during the semester. “This class was full of energy and exploding with ideas.”

The students planned entertainment, food, and promotions for the three stores in Natick, Massachusetts; Germantown, Tennessee; and Bayshore, Wisconsin. They partnered with local charities and the Vera Bradley Foundation for Breast Cancer.

They also took—and passed—the same tests, midterms, and final exams as students enrolled in the traditional class.

“It was a lot easier for me to retain the information,” Sieb says.

Schultz agrees. “We did not just memorize information for an exam. We applied it.”

Sandi Fuller, a junior majoring in accounting, says the experience gave her the confidence to seize a last-minute opportunity for an accounting internship during the spring 2008 semester. “Because of this class experience, I realized how important this additional internship would be to my career.”

“Students come to class and expect to be told what to think, memorize it, and then take an exam and tell us what we told them,” Bott says.

Hands-on learning experiences with organizations such as Vera Bradley can help change students’ expectations.

“With immersive learning, we’re still teaching them what they need to know, but they have to work harder to get it, and it will likely stay with them longer.”

The students agree.

“Many times people graduate, get a job, and don’t know what to do or how to interact,” Stone says. “They don’t know what is expected of them in their new job, because their only experience has been sitting in class listening to a professor lecture. With more real-world experiences during college, our actual experiences will be better once we graduate.” ●

*Sue Spence is a freelance writer for higher-education and health-care publications and Web sites. She lives in Carmel, Indiana.*



**Top:** Rod Davis, Miller College of Business interim dean, and Jennifer Bott, assistant professor (right), socialize with Vera Bradley cofounder Patricia Miller. **Bottom:** Purses on display at the Vera Bradley store in Oak Brook, Illinois.



## IMMERSIVE LEARNING AT BALL STATE

Immersive learning programs must meet the following criteria:

- carry academic credit
- engage participants in an active learning process that is student-driven but guided by a faculty mentor
- produce a tangible outcome or product such as a business plan, policy recommendation, book, play, or DVD
- involve at least one team of students, often working on a project that is interdisciplinary in nature
- include community partners and create an impact on the larger community as well as on the student participants
- focus on student learning outcomes
- help students define a career path or make connections to a profession or industry.