Tending to Business

New initiatives put the School of Management in position for the future.

by Alix Mitchell

Over the last nine years, enrollment in the School of Management has been multiplying, increasing from 800 full-time students in 1976 to 2,000 this fall. Yet Dean L. Richard Oliker is far from complacent about the school's success. Armed with demographic data and college enrollment projections, he has been methodically preparing for a battle to keep those enrollment figures healthy.

"Within a year or so," Oliker says, "the number of college-age students in America will start to decline, and that decline will continue for seven or eight years. What that means—and this is already becoming the case—is that we're going to have a buyer's market.

"If we just rest on our laurels," he explains, "then, when the market moves more heavily toward the buyer's advantage, we're going to be left in the dust. Students are going to be looking for innovative and creative programs, and if we don't have one, we're going to be running in second place."

Equipped with that insight, Oliker spent the past five years planning four major changes designed to further distinguish the school from its competitors. All went into effect this fall, when the school welcomed its first executive MBA class, instituted a newly revised undergraduate curriculum, established the Innovation Management Center, and opened the Employment Studies Institute.

In each case, business leaders, who hire—or don't hire—the school's graduates helped Oliker and his faculty plan the changes. The most striking example of this cooperation is the Executive MBA Program, which allows mid-level managers to earn a graduate degree in business administration—while continuing to work full-time—in as little as two years. Typically, these are up-and-coming executives, in their 30s and 40s, who need an MBA in order to step up to the higher echelons of corporate ad-

In addition, participants can take the school's personal computers home with them in order to complete homework assignments. "We don't want a six-figure executive driving into Syracuse from Avon, for instance, and then having to wait in line to use a computer," explains Vedder. "These are very busy people."

Corporations from all over central New York—Avon, Binghamton, Norwich, Canajoharie, and, of course, Syracuse—have sent a total of 21 mid-level managers to the program during its first year. However, Vedder and Huebsch are not enrolling the second class until September 1987, after the first group has completed the two-year program. "We could probably write a book right now on how to run an executive MBA program," explains Huebsch, "but we know we'll learn even more from the experiences of the first class. We'll survey them when they graduate and refine the program in whatever ways are necessary. The second class will benefit from these changes."

This determination to rethink and refine traditional programs so that they rise above mere adequacy also explains the decision to revamp the school's undergraduate curriculum—another change that went into effect this fall. Although the undergraduate program had placed among the top 30 undergraduate programs in the country in the 1984 Gourman Report (an annual survey of the nation's undergraduate programs), Oliker and his faculty were convinced the undergraduate curriculum could be improved.

"What was unusual about this decision," says Oliker, "is that it grew out of a three-year study that our advisory council conducted. Normally, advisory councils do not become so involved in a school's curriculum. But when the council members—all of whom are corporate executive officers—presented their findings, the faculty unanimously decided to revamp the program."

The program's director, Assistant Dean Russell J. Hamilton, worked closely with council members to find out what they, as business executives, look for in management graduates. The answer: a deep grounding in a major subject, coupled with strong analytical and quantitative skills. Consequently, students now take eight courses in their major rather than the previous three, including four related courses from other disciplines. Classes in writing and public speaking are also required, and, to top it off, the entire curriculum has been reorganized into groups that develop such abilities as analytic and quantitative skills.

"We regrouped classes, and now require that classes within a group be taken in sequence," Hamilton explains, "so that they build upon one another. When we explain the curriculum, we emphasize that this continuity gives a stronger command of the communication, analytical, and quantitative skills—skills that companies look for when they hire."

"This curriculum," says Oliker, "builds on Syracuse University's interdisciplinary approach to teaching, allowing us to involve many other colleges on campus in the instruction of our curriculum. No other college or university in the nation has a curriculum like it."

Both the undergraduate and executive MBA programs have dramatically changed the school's educational offerings. Yet other programs are also changing, as they
are affected by the school’s new Innovation Management Center and Employment Studies Institute.

Three years ago, David Wilemon, professor of marketing, and some of his colleagues, received Xerox and General Electric grants for research in innovation management. The American economy was then at a frighteningly low ebb, and Wilemon wanted to know how businesses could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, harness “Yankee ingenuity,” and turn the tide. In other words, what, exactly, makes an innovative business innovative? How are exciting ideas born, carried out, and marketed? When do they fail, and why?

The research led to new developments within the School of Management. Last year, an innovation management curriculum was added to the program. This fall, the Innovation Management Center opened its doors. Both meet business needs that have gone unfulfilled, Wilemon says.

“A wealth of writing had been done in this field,” Wilemon explains, “but until now, none of it had been gathered in one place or examined as a whole.” But businesses need the knowledge. “Often an innovative company is dragged along by a hot product that finds immediate market acceptance,” Wilemon says, “but when it gets into a competitive marketplace, it lacks the management skills—such as how to best utilize financial resources—necessary to keep ahead.”

The new, graduate-level innovation management courses show students how to breed and manage innovation; the program provides innovative—or potentially innovative—companies with graduates who can contribute to their success. In addition, companies may go to the center’s researchers directly for assistance.

Both the program and the center are popular resources. In its first year, the new curriculum was the most popular among MBA marketing majors, attracting more than 200 students. In the meantime, the center continues to attract interest from companies eager to use it for research; companies have investigated, for example, the marketing potential of a new energy technology, and how to stimulate a stagnating international business. Already, both the center and curriculum have made their marks.

“We get calls from schools from all over the country,” Wilemon says, “asking us about our work. We are known as the place to go if you’re interested in innovation management.”

Like the Innovation Management Center, the school’s newly formed Employment Studies Institute is distinguishing itself from the competition. Other industrial relations institutes exist, but SU’s has a unique focus, according to its director, Mike Schuster, an associate professor of personnel and industrial relations.

“Most institutes around the country focus on union-related issues, such as internal union governance,” he explains. “They do little research on how companies [managers] make employment decisions, such as whether to lay off workers, cut back benefits, or even open a new plant.”

Helping managers grapple with employment issues is one of the institute’s main functions. For instance, a recent study conducted by Schuster led to the lowering of wage-benefits costs and to the establishment of a profit-sharing plan for a business that, before Schuster’s research, was floundering.

The institute is made up of 28 faculty members from 14 different schools who are studying a broad range of topics, such as career change; management “succession planning”; the effects of asbestoses (the disease caused by the intake of asbestos); and managerial effectiveness. The 28-member staff works closely with a group of external institute fellows, including former labor secretary William J. Usery Jr. and Tracy H. Ferguson, an SU alumnus known nationally for his work on labor issues and a founder of the institute.

While the institute’s research helps businesses solve employment problems, it is also strengthening the school’s personnel and industrial relations curriculum. For instance, a new course in international personnel grew out of the institute’s research, and other related courses are expected to develop across campus. All courses derived from institute research will be open to students of any discipline.

Together the new curricula and research centers further Oliker’s plan to differentiate the school from its competition. He stresses that these changes are long term, rather than “faddish,” and make the most of the school’s strengths. Both the Innovation Management Center and the Employment Studies Institute, for instance, were formed not only because they were needed, but because the school had the people—David Wilemon and Mike Schuster—with the expertise to put such centers together.

Some resources were lost along the way to bolster others: The school’s programs in real estate and insurance were cut, for instance, but their faculty members were added to the personnel and industrial relations program, which once offered only the bachelor’s degree. Now it also boasts master’s and Ph.D programs.

“Basically,” Oliker explains, “we wanted to specialize in certain areas while offering approved, but creative, undergraduate and graduate programs. To do that, we made some strategic trade-offs, reallocated our resources, and put our money on the winners.”

To the dean, that’s just good business.