Fay Cobb Payton, PhD
Associate Professor of
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NCSU PROFESSOR GIVES STUDENTS WORKPLACE EDGE WITH SAS®

Industry

Higher Education

Business Issue

Give students real-world experience in the classroom so that they have a competitive advantage in the job market.

Solution

SAS® gives students access to industry-leading customer intelligence technologies that enhance their IT skills.

Benefits

Students enjoy a competitive advantage in post-college job search.

In today's uncertain labor market, recent college graduates need every advantage available to stand out from the crowded field of job applicants. A North Carolina State University professor says her undergraduate IT capstone course, which relies on SAS, is giving her students that competitive edge. And her students agree.

"I'm working on a data governance project, which involves data quality, so I have a lot of experience with that because of our capstone project," says a former student who now works at a major IT company. "I know more about it than my team, and I get to run an information session that talks about what's cutting edge and which metrics I think we should use when evaluating our data sets."

And that's just one of many success stories. Fay Cobb Payton, PhD, Associate Professor of Information Technology at NCSU in Raleigh, NC, is helping shape undergraduates into future thought leaders – many of whom are landing choice jobs straight out of school. The senior-level course simulates actual business environments and real-world problems. The students must first learn how to use SAS and then use that knowledge to make recommendations for improving the bottom line for a variety of businesses that, in recent years, have turned to the students for help solving business pains.

"SAS keeps me current in a field that changes every day," Payton says. "And it gives my students a leg up when they go into the work force because they can make decisions from a data warehousing or data mining perspective or a data analysis and data quality perspective that they wouldn't have gotten from a regular database class."

Gaining real-world skills

Over the years, Payton's class has focused on analytics. Lately, though, she has challenged her students with projects intended to broaden their perspective on enterprise applications. "I want them thinking globally," she says. "I want them to see how the outcome of their analyses does not reside in just one silo. I want them thinking about how it affects the organization at the enterprise level."

Payton calls on her colleagues in the business world and at government agencies to supply the projects her students work on in teams each semester. Typically, the students are undergraduates who are concentrating their studies in the IT field.

Because of the nontraditional nature of the class – working collaboratively with strangers and with the absence of textbooks – the students gain invaluable problem-solving skills. In order to get there, though, the students must be adventurous, curious and not squeamish about diving in.

"The class is less structured than traditional classes are," Payton explains. "It's as though the students are already in the workplace and they are facing challenges that they must resolve for the benefit of the entire company. We're actually gathering the data and entering it

> "In this market and industry, the students who have taken the course come out with real skills and can adjust to team environments in the workplace."
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> **Fay Cobb Payton, PhD**
> Assistant Professor of Information Technology

ourselves, so we don't have a nice, neat data set that was handed to us. So there are a lot of uncertainties, which throw my students off in the beginning. But, as each student adjusts to his or her role in the project and they start getting comfortable with SAS and domain implications, they can see how their work will pay off in the end."

The program relies on several SAS offerings, including the hosted SAS OnDemand for Academics, which makes it easy for professors and students to get access to SAS for teaching and for completing coursework through a Web-based delivery model. "We have immediate access to the software, we can use it on several computers, and there aren't any disks to install or any lengthy configuration required," Payton says.

Students succeed in job search

The payoff comes in more ways than a passing grade. Payton's students have parlayed their new-found knowledge of SAS and the world of predictive analytics into high-paying dream jobs with elite employers.

Payton's most recent graduates have gone on to work for KPMG, Cisco, IBM, Unisys and Merck. Other students are mulling over multiple high-paying offers. "These graduates are already up to speed; they don't need much training," Payton explains. "One of my students had been at an IT company for only six weeks, and the management team came to him and said, 'You know, we need you to help us figure this out.' And it was because of the SAS knowledge he brought into the workplace."

A thought leader is born

Meanwhile, Payton now has access to research data upon which she can base publishable papers and enhance her reputation among faculty at other schools by helping them establish similar programs. Just as her course has helped students become thought leaders in business, Payton herself is emerging as a respected thought leader in academia, in part, because of her relationship and work with SAS.

"SAS collaborations offer me the opportunity to build my research," Payton says. "By getting the actual software from SAS and DataFlux, I gain control that I wouldn't have otherwise, which influences the way I can reach my students."