FORGING THE FUTURE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: DEVELOPING LEADERS THROUGH REMOTE EXPERIENTIAL CONSULTING PROJECT COURSES

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Full paper
Experiential Track

ABSTRACT

Gannon University faculty have embraced a variety of pedagogies and technologies to create a remote synchronous experiential consulting program that helps develop leadership competencies in global students. Recent global events have set the stage for development of new pedagogies which prepare students to become members of inclusive highly productive globally distributed teams. Depending on the class, students embrace remote technologies to collaborate and serve as consultants who work closely with real-world clients to either develop implementation road maps for clients to embrace big data capabilities or to develop comprehensive strategic business plans that incorporate big data capabilities for true strategic advantage. Through synergistic collaboration with a variety of external incubators and networks, school of business faculty provide students with team-based semester-long remote experiential client consulting projects that incorporate all requisite content for their assigned courses. Faculty serve as instructors, mentors, and coaches. Instruction transcends into environments that simulate guided internship experiences that enhance students' learning journey to leadership.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an experiential pedagogical model designed to transform business students into leaders. As an added benefit the remote nature of this model allows development of resilient leaders under adverse conditions. Covid conditions have required many universities to adapt their teaching styles. Benefits of face-to-face team-based learning and leadership development have been widely recognized in academia. Many universities are asking if that level of student development can be maintained in environments where face-to-face instruction is challenged or not possible. Universities have asked how they can embrace the new technologies to continue developing leaders. Traditional education provides students with the foundation for success in their disciplines but often stops short of the true potential of developing students into leaders. Often faculty strive to provide students with internships so that they can gain experience applying discipline specific skills. One of the challenges many faculty experience is obtaining enough internships for all students. A second challenge is that often students in internships do not fully focus on performing tasks related to their discipline. Sometimes their days would be filled with filing documents, answering the phone, and running errands. Experiential learning can provide a faculty-mentored type of internship. The pedagogical model presented in this paper follows a faculty-mentored internship structure.

Context: Definitions

The development of a pedagogical model needs to be grounded in academic research and literature. Scholarly writings and faculty experience served as the base for development. Experiential learning uniquely equips faculty to provide students with opportunities and experiences that will transform students into resilient leaders who are ready to lead their organizations into new frontiers. Three definitions of experiential learning (Gentry, 1990) were embraced in the development of this pedagogical model. The AACSB Task Force (1986, p. 3) defined applied experiential learning as "a business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty." ABSEL members augment this definition by adding Hoover's (1974) premise that experiential learning has a quality of personal involvement-the whole-person-in both *their* feeling and cognitive aspects being in the learning event. ABSEL also embraces Hoover's expanded work with Whitehead (1975, p. 25) that experiential learning "exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, effectively, and behaviorally, processes knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement." Kerner (2018) posits experiential learning is deemed to have five distinct advantages over traditional classroom, instructor-centric methods: ability for students to immediately apply knowledge; access to real-time coaching and feedback; promotion of teamwork and communication skills; development of reflective practice habits; and accomplishments are obvious. Remote synchronous instruction within the context of this paper is defined as, environments where students, faculty, and clients meet virtually and simultaneously during scheduled meeting times using online communication and collaboration tools. A literature search for a definition of leadership reveals more than 200 definitions. The experiential model described in this paper defined leadership from an application point of view. Peter F. Drucker states, "Leadership is the lifting of a *person's* vision to higher sights, the raising of a *person's* performance to a higher

standard, the building of a *person's* personality beyond its normal limitations." Due to environmental contexts over the past few years this experiential model was designed to not just transform students into the traditional type of leader but leaders who were resilient. Luthar (2006) and Luthar & Chicchetti (2000) defined resilience as positive adaptation despite adversity.

Context: Gannon University

The experiential pedagogical model was developed at Gannon University. Gannon University is a private, faith-based university located in Erie, Pennsylvania. With a student population of approximately 5,000, Gannon University has a significant international presence with students from more than 72 countries. The Center for Business Ingenuity at Gannon University is uniquely structured for student/business collaboration as it houses classrooms, the Erie Technology Incubator, the Small Business Development Center, and the Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network. The Beehive Network is a consortium of four regional universities, each specializing in a specific area in the life cycle of growing businesses.

Context: The Consulting Model

The classes presented in this paper adopt a real-world business consulting model (Appendix A) as a pedagogical tool to achieve learning goals. Many global consulting firms, e.g., Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey and Company, Accenture, etc., use variations of this model. Faculty meet with a client before the semester begins. Vetting is done at this time. Client needs are determined before a semester begins. Students meet those needs as the semester progresses. Student level consulting projects begin with project initiation, the contract, and a clearance kick-off meeting. Everyone's capabilities and resultant roles are determined and clarified during this stage. Once the project is commenced, work proceeds through phases. Clients are presented with deliverables at each stage and sign off before work continues. Experience shows that having faculty predetermine phases with clients before the semester begins leads to smoother transitions and more productive projects. During phase meetings, students make presentations to clients and ask if deliverables meet the clients' approval. It should be noted the client doesn't always know what the client doesn't know. Faculty tell students clients are in the drivers' seat, clients will be learning as students provide reports, insights, and recommendations. During phase meetings clients may express they never really thought of their business that way. Trust between the client and consultant plays an important role in consulting. The more the clients trust the students, the more tasks the clients may ask of the students. Phase meetings provide faculty with opportunities for faculty to coach students in how to communicate and serve clients. Students work through the phases and develop final deliverables. The final step is feedback. The students evaluate their own progression through the project and each student's contribution to the overall project. To add to the level of learning, students receive multiple areas of feedback. Students get feedback from faculty and clients. During the project students learn how to listen to the client. They learn how to draw information from communication with the client. Students learn how to read the body language and understand comments made by clients. Students learn how to ascertain if the client is engaged and how to draw clients back into conversations. Students learn to observe how clients exhibit engagement, e.g., when clients lean in and ask questions. It should be noted in many ways the consulting project becomes the primary focus of the semester.

REMOTE EXPERIENTIAL CONSULTING PROJECT COURSES

Faculty at Gannon University have implemented this experiential model in three graduate courses.

- GMBA 799 – Business Policy and Strategy
- GMBA 625 – Data Driven Strategic Planning and Decision Making
- GMBA 725 – Integrated Business Strategy and Analytics

The courses will be presented in chronological order of development. The following narratives are presented from the first-person aspect as I was the lead faculty member on implementation of the remote experiential model at Gannon University.

GMBA 799 – Business Policy and Strategy

This pedagogical model was implemented for the first time in GMBA 799, Business Policy and Strategy, due to COVID restrictions during Spring 2020. GMBA 799 was the capstone class for the traditional ground-based MBA program at Gannon University. Zoom served as the platform upon which students were able to remotely meet with and serve clients. As this was their capstone course, students had all their MBA coursework behind them. In this course, students learn to apply functional expertise to actual strategic issues. Students are challenged to assess real managerial problems, integrate all skills developed in their MBA curriculum, and *develop* well-reasoned, innovative, and practical solutions to these problems. These learning goals are to be accomplished in a context of critical analysis of accepted economic, social, political, and environmental paradigms.

GMBA 799 – Deliverables

As this was a capstone business policy and strategy course, the three primary deliverables were a business model canvas, a strategic business plan, and a pitch deck. A business model canvas is a tool that is built by 490 consultants around the world that helps people look at their business from a high-level comprehensive point of view (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). As most business students at Gannon University have an opportunity to serve clients who are being served by the Erie Technology Incubator, Small Business Development Center, or Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network, these deliverables were exactly those needed by clients. The types of clients served by students between Spring 2020 and Spring 2021 were a sporting goods supply company, financial app, translation app, government supply contractor, and a nonprofit whose purpose was to assist underprivileged people groups with financial literacy.

GMBA 799 – Timeline Overview

Appendix B provides a 15-week timeline for GMBA 799. The timeline reflects student meetings with the clients and classroom meetings between students and the professor. In accordance with the consulting model, students met remotely with the client at the inception of the project, to provide phase status reports, and to provide final deliverable reports to the client.

GMBA 625 – Data Driven Strategic Planning and Decision Making

In Fall 2020, Gannon University launched an MBA in Business Analytics. One of the first courses in the MBA-BA sequence is GMBA 625 – Data Driven Planning and Decision Making. In this course students examine the technologies, information, and analytics that are important for effective management and control of modern firms. With a focus on dynamic decision making and optimization approaches for complex decisions as well as strategies for data driven decision making, students learn to look at company data from a deeper perspective and use the data to make decisions that will strengthen the company's competitive position in the marketplace. Students learn how companies can use big data to visualize and predict customer and business process patterns. Students learn how companies can optimize their efficiency, effectiveness, and performance based on those patterns. Students learn how to create and use big data dashboards.

GMBA 625 – Deliverables

The key client deliverables in GMBA 625 are a big data maturity index and workshop. The big data maturity index plan helps clients measure the degree to which their organization has integrated data and analytics into their business models. The five stages are as follows: business monitoring, business insights, business optimization, data monetization, and business metamorphosis (Shmarzo, 2016). To present the client with a workshop on how to increase their status on the big data maturity index, students conduct client specific research, interview key decision makers, explore options, and make recommendations. The types of clients served by GMBA 625 students included a social media influence network provider, translator app, a personal geographic monitoring service, industrial supply chain data company, and financial services provider.

GMBA 625 – Timeline Overview

Appendix C provides a 15-week timeline for GMBA 625. The timeline reflects student meetings with the clients and classroom meetings between students and the professor. GMBA 625 also followed the experiential consulting model. It should be noted that as this is a first semester course the class was subdivided into teams of about 4-5 students with each student team serving their own real-world client. There were not as many phase calls as in GMBA 799 because this class is comprised of primarily first-semester students and therefore is much more structured. As professor, I begin each course with a setup call with the client. During the call I determine the client's key business initiatives. I determine what the client's business is designed to accomplish. What customer need do they meet? I then share this information with students. Students then set up an initial meeting with the client to learn and ask questions. What is the persona of their client's typical customer? What visualizations would help the client? What key performance indicators would help the client? Teams use Google Docs to record observations, develop recommendations, and write reports. They take all this information, apply new concepts learned in class, synthesize recommendations, then present the recommendations to clients. As professor, I guide students through the consulting project equipping them with observational and brainstorming techniques. The project concludes with comprehensive reports and peer evaluations.

GMBA 725 – Integrated Business Strategy and Analytics

GMBA 725 – Integrated Business Strategy and Analytics serves as the capstone for the MBA in Business Analytics that was launched in Fall 2020. As it takes students a minimum of 18 months to take all the courses necessary to earn the MBA-BA, GMBA 725 was taught for the first time in Fall 2021. This integrative course enables students to synthesize and apply all the knowledge, skills and abilities learned in the Business Analytics MBA Program. Students complete a culminating project in which they develop and present a data-driven strategic plan to improve the performance and sustainability of an organization. The primary goal of this course is to challenge students to apply powerful quantitative strategies and techniques to analyze business and market data to improve decision outcomes across all the functional areas of an organization.

GMBA 725 – Deliverables

GMBA 725 is an applied synthesis of GMBA 799 and 625. In this course, students consider the strategic application of big data in every functional area of an organization. During this course they revisit the business model canvas, this time developing analytic decision-making dashboards inside each area of the canvas. All dashboards are combined to fulfill the mission and/or key business initiative of the company. Students help clients expand their understanding and vision of possibilities. The students help clients take what they already know and apply it at the company-wide level. This leads to the potential of true transformation in the client's company.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Incorporation of several course management documents assists in the effectiveness of remote team-based experiential learning. While remote team-based experiential learning has many advantages, e.g., access by more global students and opportunities for engagement, increase collaboration, and interactivity, benefits of remote synchronous instruction are achieved through increased course management by administrating faculty. There are some challenges of which faculty need to be aware. Supporting documents are especially invaluable in remote synchronous environments because communication is often limited when compared to live face-to-face learning environments. Experience reveals that communication does not develop and flow organically. When communication is limited faculty must play a much stronger role providing direction and structure. In addition, faculty needs to be cognizant students and clients may be at different points on their technological capabilities and learning curve. Supporting documents include a team charter, peer feedback, and peer evaluation.

Supporting Documents: Team Charter

At the beginning of the semester students complete and sign a team charter. The team charter addresses who is on the team, their contact information, when they are going to meet, and what to do if there is a conflict. Since this model occurs in a remote synchronous environment, students must also decide upon which platform they will communicate with each other and with the client. When conflicts arise, students are instructed to revisit the team charter. If students say the charter is not working, they are instructed to rewrite their charter. Leaders are solution providers. The team charter assists teams as they progress through Tuckman's stages of group development, i.e., forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 2010). A copy of key parts of the team charter are provided in Appendix D.

Supporting Documents: Peer Feedback

Peer feedback has much pedagogical support in academic literature (Van Popta, Kral, Camp, Martens, & Simons, 2017). When there are multiple teams in a room, students who are not presenting at a specific time provide feedback to presenting teams. Feedback is provided anonymously. Feedback helps teams brainstorm and expand recommendations for clients. Sample questions from the peer feedback are as follows:

- List two factors or considerations in building a data analytics logical infrastructure this student team presented especially effectively.
- List two questions you would ask the team if you were the client.
- What two recommendations regarding either presentation or content areas would you give the presenting team to make their next presentation stronger?

These questions along with a scoring rubric provide student teams with rich actionable feedback which can be incorporated into their reports to the client. These augmentations enhance the value of the students to the client. A sample rubric and peer feedback form are presented in Appendix E.

Supporting Documents: Peer Grading and Self-Reflection

Students complete peer grading evaluations at the end of the semester to ensure each student is rewarded and graded for their level of contribution. This form helps prevent social loafing during the semester. Students are presented with this form at the beginning of the semester, so they understand the level of contribution expected from them. In addition, the form asks self-reflection questions so that students can assess their level of learning. A copy of the peer grading and self-reflection form is presented in Appendix F.

FEEDBACK

Success of remote experiential teaching can be seen in the comments received from students and clients. Three representative sample comments are presented here.

Student Feedback

At the conclusion of the semester students were asked what they learned from this remote experiential experience?

"Entire experience of working with a live client has been great. I have learned how to professionally interact with clients, understand how a company works, and think out of the box. I also learnt how to identify a problem, understand the reason why the problem exists, and try to develop a solution for the existing problem." *S.M., international student*

"I learned how to be a project manager and lead a group through something. In addition, I learned that listening to clients is really important and more when you are working face-to-face with them in consulting. It was a great experience and I wish I can do it again." *J.M.*

Client Feedback

Clients were also asked to comment about the value of the consulting services they received from the students. A sample comment follows:

"I was really impressed with the format of Dr. Kuvshinikov's GMBA 725 capstone class. He puts a lot of thought behind how to integrate everything the students have learned and apply it in a way that also benefits the client. At every step, Dr. K would point out best practices and key learnings to empower the students to become good leaders. When we kicked off the project there were a lot of "deer in the headlights" looks. But by time they completed the final presentation, each student was well prepared, confident, and delivered a professional finished product. The mock-up dashboards took into consideration current capabilities as well as industry standards and best practices. There were some impressive insights, and I was able to watch the transformation of curious, questioning students into business professionals ready to make a difference." *K.R.*

BEST PRACTICES

Experience implementing the remote experiential learning pedagogies over the past several semesters has led to the development of a list of best practices for faculty regarding students and clients. Those best practices are shared here.

Best Practices Regarding Students

Regarding students, faculty need to remember they are professor, mentor, & coach to their students. The following student-centric practices are recommended to help ensure success of the pedagogical model:

- Communication is key. Faculty need to talk to the students all the time. Faculty need to reassure students and explain what is happening at each stage of the process. Debriefs are welcome.

- Faculty need to use multiple types of communication when dealing with remote instruction: lectures, emails, transcriptions, learning management system postings.

- Coach students on how to talk to clients.

- Every student has a speaking part. Don't allow any social loafing.

- Implement peer feedback during presentations.

- Watch team sizes – Student teams of no more than five guard against social loafing.

- Rehearsals are vital – The live to client presentation should not be the first-time faculty hear or view student information. Rehearsals up front prevent damage control with clients later. The professor never wants to tell the client what the student just told you is not true. Damage control does not build confidence in students.

- The faculty member needs to coach presentation skills (Who talks/listens/watches? Who takes notes?) Tell students when one has eye contact with client, the other is writing. A student can't watch body language and write at the same time.

- Faculty and students need to repeat client requests. Make sure everyone is on the same page.

- Coach students to encourage and not overwhelm clients. Diplomacy is key in consulting – the business is their baby. If someone had a baby, a student would not tell them, wow that is not a good-looking baby. Tell students they should never say that to a client. Your business idea doesn't work, it is bad! They just insulted the client's baby. Students need to know when to encourage the client and when to challenge them.

- Check technology and final content review before meeting.

- Coach for confidence.

Best Practices Regarding Clients

Regarding clients, faculty need to remember they are professor, mentor, & coach to the client as well. The following client-centric practices are recommended to help ensure success of the pedagogical model:

- Communication is key. Talk to the client before the semester begins. Communication is key here.
- It's all about building trust
- Preliminary planning is vital for success.
- Ensure client commitment. The client needs to commit to being available to students.
- The client is in the driver's seat regarding consulting deliverables.
- As trust grows, the clients may change or expand their list of deliverables. Communicate with your client so they don't overwhelm the students. Build phases of deliverables. If the client has three phases and students can only get to two of them, which two does the client want? If students could only get to one deliverable, which one does the client want?
- Build a healthy client pipeline – don't burn out clients.
- Partner with the client in developing students into leaders.

CONCLUSION

Our experience is students and client embrace remote experiential learning projects. Clients comment that students are helping them understand their companies from a point of view they have never seen before. Students have commented these are the hardest courses they've ever taken but they are the courses in which they've learned the most and enjoyed the most. This model creates the environment in which students can truly flourish. Students comment that classroom instruction is good, but when they watch a client listen to their recommendations, and then implement their recommendations it truly builds confidence, influence, and leadership. It should be noted all of this is being done remotely. There are no live face-to-face meetings. Students gain experience working in virtual environments, working with international students, working with students from other cultures, working with live clients, and significantly increasing their confidence and resilience. From a faculty member's point of view student engagement and growth is very impressive.

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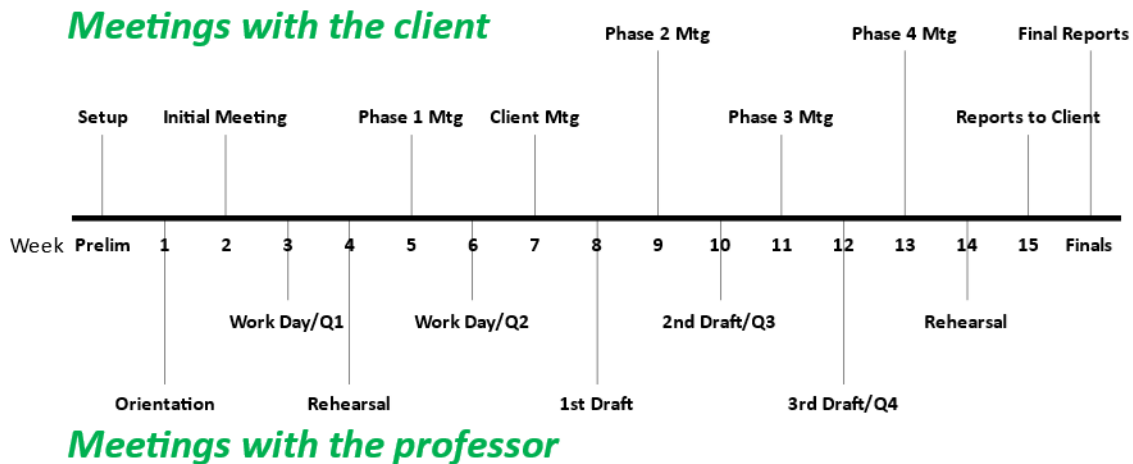
APPENDIX A – THE CONSULTING MODEL

The Consulting Model An opportunity for simulating managed internships
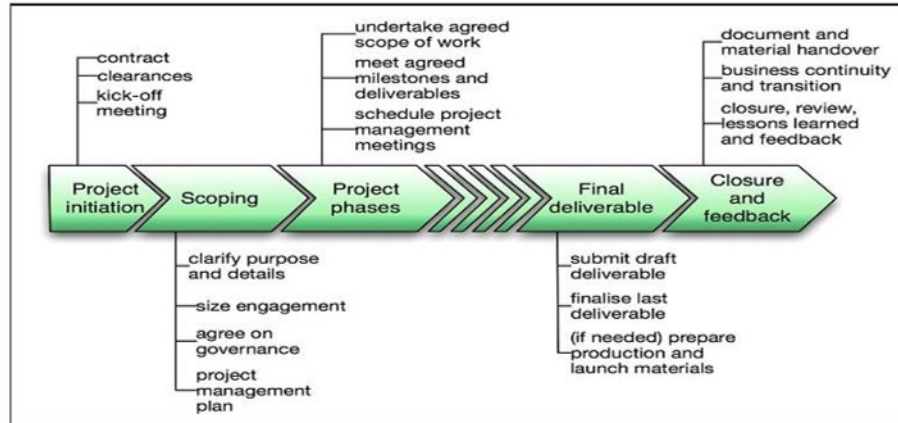
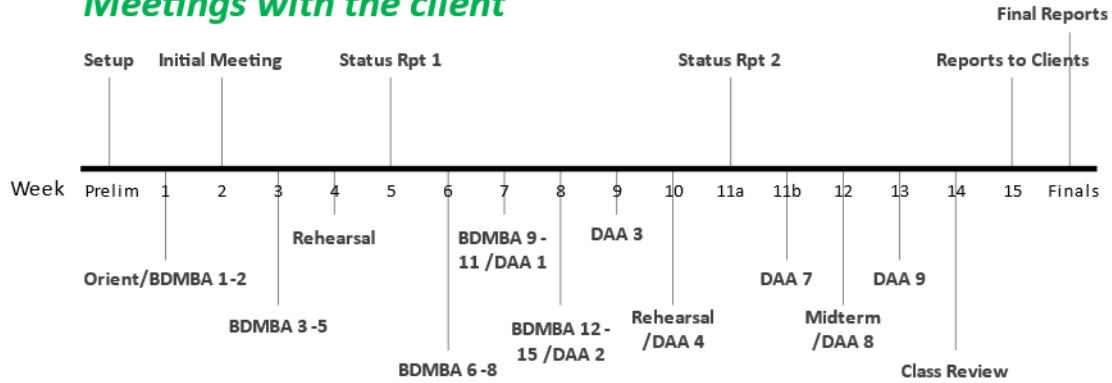APPENDIX B – GMBA 799 TIMELINE

GMBA 799– Timeline Overview

APPENDIX C – GMBA 625 TIMELINE

GMBA 625– Timeline Overview

Meetings with the client

					Final Reports
Setup	Initial Meeting	Status Rpt 1		Status Rpt 2	Reports to Clients

Week	Prelim	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11a	11b	12	13	14	15	Finals

Rehearsal

BDMBA 9 - 11 /DAA 1

DAA 3

Orient/BDMBA 1-2

DAA 7

DAA 9

BDMBA 3 -5

BDMBA 12 - 15 /DAA 2

Rehearsal /DAA 4

Midterm /DAA 8

BDMBA 6 -8

Class Review

Meetings with the professor

BDMBA = Big Data MBA (Schmarzo, 1e)
DAA = Data Analytics for Accounting with Connect (Richardson, Terrell, and Teeter, 2e)

APPENDIX D – TEAM CHARTER

Supporting Documents: Team Charter

GANNON UNIVERSITY
DAHLKEMPER SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Team Charter

Instructions: *To ensure a collaborative project experience, each team should meet and jointly complete the team charter below. Select one team member to submit the charter on behalf of the team by the deadline prescribed by the professor.*

I. Team Member Contact Information:

Name	Phone	Time Zone and Availability during the Week	Email

II. Name of Client Company:

III. Team Rules and Guidelines:

(Discuss expectations for team members and define a method of working as a team.)

IV. Weekly Operating Procedures

(Describe how work will be split up and roles and responsibilities for each week)

V. Communication

(Discuss primary communication method(s) and weekly meeting schedules)

VI. Conflict Resolution

(Define a process for dealing with conflict)

APPENDIX E – PEER FEEDBACK

Supporting Documents: Peer Feedback

GMBA 625 – Data Driven Strategic Planning and Decision Making
Prof. Joseph Kuvshinikov, CPA, CFE, MBA, PhD
Complete one form for each team other than yours.

Evaluator Name:
Client Name:

Group Presentation Rubric					
	Excellent (4 Points)	Good (3 Points)	Fair (2 Points)	Poor (1 Points)	Assessment-Points Earned
Organization	Presentation was very organized and was very easy to follow. Transitions between group members were well planned and executed cleanly.	Presentation was fairly organized and pretty followable. Transitions might have been slightly discontinuous but did not take away greatly from the overall presentation.	Presentation was not clearly organized. Transitions between members were jumpy or awkward.	Presentation lacked organization. Poor transitions between group members individual parts. Presentation lacked order and very difficult to follow.	
Teamwork/ Participation	The group worked very well with each other, and the presentation was shared equally among the group members.	The group worked well with each other and communicated well. Some members participated slightly more than others.	Group communicated relatively well with a few lapses in the presentation; some students dominated the presentation and others did not participate much.	Group did not work well together. There were obvious miscommunications and lapses in the presentation.	
Content	Group members had a stronghold on the content and content was thoroughly addressed. No mistakes were made with regard to content knowledge.	Most of the group members has a solid understanding of the content. Content missing minor elements or contained minor errors.	Group members had only a superficial understanding of content. Several mistakes were made during the presentation.	Group members had little to no understanding of the content addressed in the presentation.	
Visual Slides	Visual aids used were used effectively throughout presentation. Group members used visual aids as a supplement, not as a crutch.	Visual aids used were somewhat effective, but weren't used consistently throughout presentation.	Visual aids used did not support verbal presentation. They lacked information, or groups members read from them.	Visual aids were not used at all.	
Total Assessment Score (Giving maximum score to each team will not earn the evaluator points unless presentations were equally outstanding)					

Please answer with complete and specific sentences. Your comments will be anonymously provided to the presenting team. (Generalities such as "It was good" or "Nice job" will not earn points.)

List two factors or considerations in building a data analytics logical infrastructure (Big Data MBA Chapters 1-5 Exercises) this student team presented especially effectively?

List two questions that you would ask the team if you were the client.

What two recommendations regarding either presentation style or content areas would you give the presenting team to make their next presentation stronger?

APPENDIX F – PEER EVALUATION

Supporting Documents: Peer Grading

GMBA 625 Data Driven Strategic Planning and Decision Making
Confidential • Team Peer Evaluation Form • Confidential

Prof. Dr. Joseph Kuvshinikov, CPA, CFE, MBA, PhD

Name: _____
Client: _____

Peer evaluations are a part of each student's 360 degree evaluation. Please complete and email to the professor by 11:59PM on Thursday, May 6, 2021.

1. Using the scale below, evaluate your teammates on their contributions to the aspects of the strategic plan project listed below:		
4	Excellent Contributor	The person significantly contributed. Without this person, the quality of our final products would have been considerably diminished.
3	Good Contributor	The person contributed. Without this person, the quality of our final products would have been diminished.
2	Marginal Contributor	The person barely contributed. Without this person, the quality of our final products would have been about the same.
1	Unsatisfactory Contributor	This person failed to contribute in any meaningful way. Other members of the group had to do more because of this person's performance. Without this person, the quality of our final products may have actually been improved.

Using the above codes, evaluate each team member (including yourself):					
Team Peer Name	Contribution to Team Dynamics, Interest, & Enthusiasm	Contribution to Research	Contribution to the Written Strategic Plan	Contribution to Presentations	Contribution to Project Leadership and Management

Briefly explain why you gave yourself these scores. What additional information should the professor understand in awarding you a grade for the project?

What one word best describes you in the context of this project?

2. Does each team peer member deserve the same project grade? Yes or No:

If you answered No, who should receive higher grades and why?

Self-Reflection
What did you learn from this experience?
What do you think went well?
What would you have done differently, given the opportunity?
Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the project?
What would like to have known or practiced before starting this class?