

ENGAGING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY IN AN ACCELERATED HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how five local businesses were involved in an experiential human resource management course project during a six-week summer term. Lessons learned from the professor's perspective will be shared along with assessment results and anecdotal feedback from the students and the partnering businesses. Implications for course design and delivery, especially for management courses delivered in an accelerated format, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

With the renewed emphasis that the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is placing on Standard 13 (Student Academic and Professional Engagement), business schools should be working harder than ever to engage the larger business community with their students through activities such as internships, live cases, and other experiential exercises. Not only do these endeavors help to satisfy AACSB accreditation requirements, but they are also considered to be "high impact educational practices" (Kuh, 2008), which puts them in the spotlight for other accrediting bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). While accreditation is vital to any university's health and sustainability, my primary impetus for engaging the business community in the classroom is to help students maximize their learning and career opportunities.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the lessons learned from incorporating an experiential learning project involving the business community in an accelerated human resource management core course. The project is described, including the professor's lessons learned. Assessment results and feedback from the students and the partnering organizations are included. The implications for course design and delivery, especially for accelerated courses, are discussed.

ENGAGING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning scholars, including several ABSEL fellows, have been promoting engaging the business community in classroom experiences and projects for many decades (see Burns, Cannon, Hoover and others for examples). Hoover (1974) defined experiential learning as "...when a personally responsible participant(s) cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement" (35). The term experiential learning was added to the

AACSB standards in 2013, and the guidance is very specific about how business schools should be engaging the business community:

"For any teaching and learning model employed, the school provides a portfolio of experiential learning opportunities for business students, through either formal coursework or extracurricular activities, which allow them to engage with faculty and active business leaders. These experiential learning activities provide exposure to business and management in both local and global contexts" (AACSB, 2013:36)

Five local and/or regional businesses agreed to participate in a summer project for a core human resource management (HRM) course. These organizations included non-profit and for-profit organizations ranging in size from 25 to 500 employees. The local chamber of commerce was used to solicit volunteers to complete the project, and the Small Business Development Center coordinated the efforts between the professor and the organizations.

THE COURSE

The course consisted of 23 undergraduate students with majors including general business, healthcare administration, management, and sports management. The class met two afternoons per week for six weeks. The students formed five teams consisting of three to five students. Teams were asked to rank their preferences for working with the organizations; when more than one team wanted to work with the same organization, the decision was made randomly.

The course project involved the student teams conducting an abbreviated human resource audit for the businesses. The audit was called a "HR Review" in order to alleviate any negativity caused by the word audit. Teams were given an audit checklist along with some sample questions to ask during their site visits (these documents will be made available during the presentation). Once the audit was completed, the teams created a report that included (1) an overview of the organization, (2) detailed findings and recommendations on three key outcomes of the audit, (3) a summary on the status of compliance regarding required postings and safety issues, and (4) conclusions/implications. The teams formally presented their findings to their classmates and the partnering business.

DATA

Students completed a pre-test and post-test, and the scores

for the projects are available. Both the students and the partner organizations were asked to complete a post-audit survey, and the university-required course evaluations were also completed. The overall results will be presented in the final draft of the paper. Only two of the five organizations completed the survey; both rated the project as “very worthwhile” and assessed the students’ goal achievement as superior with one human resource manager stating “From start to finish, the students exceeded expectations”. Anecdotal feedback from students via comments on a supplemental course evaluation was mixed; some students felt the project was too ambitious for a summer term. Student feedback is still being analyzed, but mixed results are anticipated.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper builds upon the work of Abston and Rhodes (2013) in which human resource management professors are challenged to collaborate with the business community in experiential learning endeavors. Doing so is not without some challenges, however. In an accelerated delivery format, students must manage the project very carefully. A detailed timeline with key milestones and deliverables should be implemented to keep the students and the organization on track. Professors are encouraged to complete a walkthrough of the organizations prior to agreeing to let the organization participate in the project, especially a HR audit/review. Depending upon how much access the students are given and the extent to which the business is already in compliance, the site visit may prove to be a waste of time for students. Additionally, a more specific checklist would be useful to students so that meaningful information is gathered rather than just an enormous quantity of items being checked. Finally, students should write about all of the strengths and weaknesses they observe rather than just choosing three topics. In this iteration of the course, only two of the five businesses attended the final presentations. In the future, the partnering business should be required to send a representative to the presentation.

REFERENCES

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