

# Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

## PROBLEMS AND PITFALLS OF EXTERNALLY SPONSORED FIELD RESEARCH PROJECTS VIEWED FROM AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

James E. Weir  
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville

### ABSTRACT

This paper describes problems which were experienced by business faculty and students at two large universities in planning and executing two separate field projects, one an externally funded private field research project and the other a publicly sponsored evaluation of a government program. In the private field research project, there was a tendency to underestimate the demands of the administrative tasks upon faculty required to provide students with this innovative experiential learning opportunity. In the government sponsored program evaluation effort, the sponsoring agency tried to exercise input, process, and output control of the research work. The paper concludes that field research projects teach students the lessons of self confidence in problem-solving, adaptability to changing circumstances, independent thinking, and social confidence, and also provide an opportunity to apply theoretical concepts and principles to real world situations and problems. It also concludes that the close working relationship between faculty and students which develops during such projects may unintentionally teach students much about business faculty weaknesses and strengths in dealing with unanticipated research and administrative problems. The behavior and example of business faculty who face threats to their academic integrity teaches more about academic standards and values than any amount of formal classroom instruction.

### PRIVATELY SPONSORED FIELD RESEARCH

In the summer of 1978, a business school department offered nine undergraduate and nine graduate students an opportunity to enroll in two independent studies courses to investigate specific financial problems which were then of intense local, state, and federal legislative interest. There were 18 students, three grant supported projects as well as three non-grant projects. The instructor's main educational objective was to provide the students with a unique experiential learning opportunity similar to the opportunities usually available in field live case studies. Students were expected to form research teams, investigate the literature, formulate research objectives, establish research questions, interview various interest groups, and collect data on the issues under study. The instructor obtained, in an informal manner, partial grants from two business interest groups in order to defray the expense of the research costs. However, when the summer session began, the expected grant money had not yet been obtained. Interest group representatives provided verbal assurances that the money would be forthcoming following the resolution of some minor difficulties.

#### Planning and Organizational Problems

The independent studies course instructor became the grant principal research investigator (PRI). One of his jobs was to be sure each student team was working on using an appropriate research methodology, and obtaining the necessary technical guidance to effectively conduct all

phases of the investigation.

Various planning and organizational problems evolved in the development of project statements of work outlining research objectives, the research methodology to be used, and the establishment of a suitable work schedule. While the students knew what topic they wanted to work on at the time of the first class meeting, they did not have a comprehensive field research plan worked out until many weeks later. Excessive delays were experienced on most projects as students established what could reasonably be done in an eight to twelve week period. Most graduate students held full time jobs and could not devote their entire efforts to the field investigations which were required to complete various projects. Moreover, great deal of uncertainty was created by the delays in receiving grant monies. As a result of these circumstances, many research reports were not completed at the end of the eight week session, or even at the end of the summer vacation.

A problem developed over the hiring of five full and part-time graduate assistants who were to assist in completing the research tasks. It was learned that the university was required by Federal law to comply with the equal employment opportunity guidelines in hiring graduate assistants. As a result there was a five to six week delay in officially hiring the graduate assistants who had been working informally as unpaid volunteers. The knowledge that they may not be hired to complete the work they had begun was highly demoralizing to these conscientious volunteers, who had used their own funds to pay expenses for a number of weeks.

About the fourth week of the summer session, the bulk of the project grant monies was received, but only after a great deal of time and effort had been expended by the principal research investigator and project director to assure the interest groups of the usefulness of the investigations being conducted. As a result, for two or three weeks the project director's attention was primarily focused on negotiating with the outside parties. This detracted from his ability to provide the supervision and coordination needed to keep student teams moving toward their research objectives.

Once the grant monies were obtained, the project director had a new set of problems with which to deal. He had to be sure fund expenditure policies were developed and implemented which would allocate the money fairly and provide for a documented accounting of how it was spent. He also had to insure that grant funds were not spent on unfunded research projects which were intermingled with the funded projects. The process of developing these policies, communicating them to the participants, and checking on how the funds were actually being spent required a great deal of the project director's time.

#### Student Reactions to Field Experiential Learning Opportunities

At the end of August, none of the research reports were finished. When students were questioned about the quality of the experiential learning they had been enjoyed the opportunity to perform field research. It was seen as educationally relevant and exciting. The problems and uncertainties they had to over-come were viewed as challenging learning opportunities and

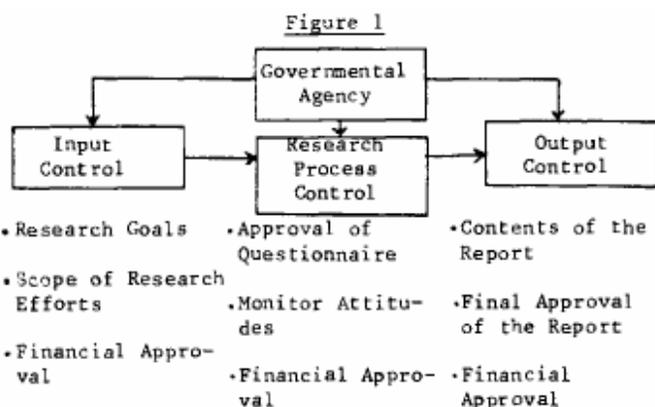
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valuable experiences.

One two-person undergraduate-student team experienced conflict in working with a business firm on a specific legislative issue. The firm wanted the team to gather data to support one position, whereas the students sought various opinions and also wanted to research the issue fully. The sponsoring organization suggested that the undergraduate students work at their facility using legislative references and other information they had assembled. Initially, their generous offer was accepted without considering the possible ramifications of this action. The principle research investigator's desire was to avoid duplication of documentation, to save time, and to minimize the expenditure of funds which were not available until very late in the study. However, as the students began to develop a questionnaire and choose respondents, they felt definite pressure to slant their investigation so that the results would support one side of the legislature issue. They learned how easily academic standards of free and open inquiry could be compromised by an action as simple and innocent as accepting a firm's hospitality. On the one hand it may have been a mistake to allow the research team to work in the firm's facilities. Nevertheless, the situation presented the undergraduate students with a unique opportunity to experience and deal with the pressures which exist in profit making firms. They had to find a way to complete their project, maintain good relationships with the host firm, and not allow their personal integrity to be compromised. From an experiential learning point of view, students experienced the effects of special interest pressure in a way which could not be simulated in a classroom situation.

### PUBLICLY SPONSORED FIELD RESEARCH

In another institution, at about the same time, a faculty team from a department of a business school received a three-month contract to investigate the effectiveness of a governmental agency program. A team of three graduate students and three faculty members began working on this project. Immediately, the governmental agency began to exert pressure on the academic team in a number of different ways depicted symbolically in Figure 1. The governmental agency is depicted as exerting a series of different types of control pressures on the research team as it proceeded through the three phases of its investigation.



#### Input Control

The governmental agency exerted various forms of input pressures. They dictated to the team their interpretation of a vaguely stated set of research goals, the terms of the request for the proposal, and the subject content of the preliminary research instruments, and also withheld initial financial approval of the contract. The agency wanted to retain sole authority to approve

the research questionnaire before it was submitted for field use. They continued to rework the questions in great detail and often delayed up to three weeks in submitting their revisions, causing considerable timing problems in conducting the field research. The university administrators, due to schedule pressures, decided to initiate the project with a good-faith expenditure of funds on the basis of a letter of intent from the agency. The withholding of financial approval of the contract constituted significant leverage on the research team, which was never to be mitigated during the entire contract period. The research team was compelled by schedule to begin the interviewer training and field research test phases without formal contract approval. During the initial phases of the program, feelings of mistrust began to build between the research team members and representatives of the governmental agency. It appeared that each party had different expectations concerning the final product of the research effort. The research team desired to discover all facets of the truth concerning the effectiveness of the program. They wanted to go beyond the formulated hypotheses and indicated variables. The agency's expectations appeared to focus more on avoiding negative observations or direct accusations that the program was in various ways ineffective, and that by implication the agency itself was also ineffective.

#### Process Control

During the execution of the research program, various direct and indirect forms of process control were exercised by the agency. Indirectly, contract approval pressures continued to be felt by the research project director and team members as well. In addition, the agency continued to demand the approval of all questionnaires which they constantly revised but never finally approved. However, the most critical aspects of process control were displayed in the monitoring attitudes of agency representatives who sought to involve themselves directly in detailed aspects of the research efforts such as interviewing field research personnel, questioning how the field teams were being managed, questioning how respondents perceived the interview questions, and continuously dictating changes they ex- the researchers to make. Needless to say, this excessively negative and critical posture caused resentment on the part of the researchers who saw in it multiple threats to their academic freedom of inquiry and personal integrity. Concurrently, multiple and conflicting instructions given by various personnel at the agency continued to confuse and frustrate the research team's efforts because there appeared to be no one person to whom they could appeal their disputes. Throughout the entire period, the agency project director changed several times causing additional uncertainty and confusion. The agency's monitoring attitudes implied incompetence in conducting the inquiry and continued to undermine the academic freedom and integrity of each team member. After two months, it became apparent that the government agency did not wish to discover causes of ineffectiveness in their programs. They appeared to be reacting in an extremely defensive manner to all implications, direct or indirect, that they were inefficient in managing their programs.

#### Output Control

It was not until the final phases of the six month research effort that the research team suffered the most extreme threat to its academic integrity. This occurred after the submittal of the first draft of the final report. The agency reacted extremely negatively to criticisms outlined in this initial draft. They

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demanded that parts of the report be changed or deleted entirely. The project director refused to modify significantly the conclusions of the report. Eventually, parts of the format and some wording changes were made, by the basic conclusions which flowed from the data were not changed. The government agency was not satisfied with the final report.

### DISCUSSION

The design and execution of field-type experiential learning projects involving externally funded sources has various problems and pitfalls as illustrated in Figure 2. Educationally, they provide students and faculty with exciting opportunities to investigate relevant issues and problems. However, these projects must be well-planned in advance and technically supported by business faculty as well as university administrators. Faculty and administrators often lend verbal support to the provision of "meaningful" learning experiences for students but may not be willing to follow-through by investing the time and effort necessary to support innovative learning projects. Business schools must exercise caution in accepting funds from firms, trade associations, and governmental agencies in order to sponsor innovative experiential learning projects. Built-in conflicts of interests and expectations regarding the results of such research are to be expected unless specific safeguards are employed. Often the sponsors are more interested in study results and conclusions than they are in the quality of the process of experiential learning for students. Frequently they seek a timely and professional quality study which validates their own preconceived biases.

Figure 2

#### PROBLEMS OF EXTERNALLY FUNDED OR SPONSORED FIELD RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. The time, effort, and internal cooperation required to plan, organize and control such projects are usually underestimated.
2. A research management group is necessary to control the administration of grant or contract funds.
3. External sponsors may try to control the initial specifications of research projects (in puts), the research processes, and the research results (outputs).
4. Multiple technical projects must have multiple faculty advisors who have the required technical expertise to advise students.
5. Various laws and governmental regulations tend to interfere with the efficient conduct of re search efforts.
6. Research teams should not locate their "home base" at an external sponsor's facility.

Educational value systems are designed to promote free and open inquiry and a full examination of all the facts on all sides of issues. Business educators seek meaningful learning experience for students in which all sides of issues and problems are openly discussed. This includes allowing students to make a reasonable number of mistakes or time consuming false starts in conducting inquiries.

The quality of student educational reports resulting from such field work often presents an additional problem. These reports

may not meet the quality standards of an independent consulting report. Thus, there could be significant disappointments on the part of sponsors who were hoping for a timely, error-free, professional quality report from a field project, especially a report which concludes substantially in their favor.

In addition, universities may become trapped on controversial public policy issues for which they have accepted outside funding. The conclusions of field research efforts by graduate or undergraduate students may tend to support one side of a public policy issue causing immediate denunciations by the other side, as well as the resulting ill will. University detractors may question the quality of the research methodology as well as the motives of the university in accepting funding from trade associations, firms, or governmental units linked with obvious special interest groups.

#### The Student View

Students frequently mentioned a number of common themes in describing the advantages and disadvantages of field experiences. It introduced them to a wide variety of people with whom they learned to establish working relationships, and to exert influence to obtain needed information and opinions. They learned to make their own decisions concerning what to ask clients and respondents, and, in general, solve the problems they encountered. This theme of independent problem-solving and executing original work seems to be characteristic of both undergraduate and graduate students. Students report that field work required that they learn to use library resources more effectively and to investigate other external sources of information. In the privately sponsored study, one undergraduate student said that in a field study she had had to employ census track data that she probably would not have used otherwise. Finally, a successfully completed field study gives students confidence in their ability to handle all aspects of a complex task, both the human relations and technical. It demonstrates to them that they can cope with real-world situations and problems. It also tends to make students look more critically and analytically at textbook concepts, theories, and principles as they judge their usefulness in solving business problems.

The students mentioned a number of disadvantages in performing field research, including the disorganization of poorly planned projects, the tendency to de-emphasize learning text-book principles and concepts while conducting the investigation, the lack of technical assistance On problems encountered in field situations, and the lack of necessary resources needed to complete a field investigation. In the studies discussed above, students appeared to have learned as much about the proper management and functioning of educational organizations under stress as they did from their own field experiences. They learned to be adaptive in overcoming obstacles placed in their path by faculty, the sponsoring special interest firm, the governmental agency, the clients, and the respondents. They may have incidentally learned more about the faculty than the faculty had intended them to learn about themselves. Though well-intentioned, faculty do not always practice the management principles of goal- setting, planning, and control which they tell students that they must practice to be successful.

#### CONCLUSION

The most important lesson students appeared to learn from the externally sponsored research efforts discussed above involved the importance of academic values and the quality of academic integrity. They learned the price that academicians were willing to pay for their integrity in the pursuit of knowledge. They

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observed that academic researchers are unwilling to betray academic values by allowing their research conclusions be compromised. Students saw that faculty did not succumb to external pressures to produce a desired result. They learned to respect these faculty and their disciplines as well as their institutions. The implementation of experiential learning experiences is difficult, time consuming, and demanding and tests not only the abilities but also the values and integrity of faculty sponsors. Such projects, however, provide students with experiences which cannot be duplicated in any other educational setting.