The Strategic Consulting Experience: Providing Experiential Learning Opportunities within an MBA Program

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ABSTRACT

This paper details one business school's experiences in developing and offering an experiential learning course for MBA students nearing the completion of their programs of study. The course was designed to provide students with opportunities to work with external clients to assist them with strategic issues facing their organizations. While the benefits of the course are numerous, the primary benefit to the student is practical experience in solving real-world problems using skills acquired through their MBA program. In addition, the clients receive (at no cost to them) consulting services from students who bring fresh and innovative perspectives to their organizations. A resultant benefit to the School is an enhanced image within the external business community due to the positive interaction between students, faculty, and clients. This paper provides readers with a wealth of information on course structure, as well as a full description of issues that must be addressed to ensure a positive learning experience for students and a beneficial consulting product for the clients.

INTRODUCTION

The Citadel School of Business is an AACSB International-accredited School of Business that houses one of the largest academic programs within The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina. The Citadel has approximately 2,200 undergraduate students in the South Carolina Corps of Cadets and another 1,000 students in The Citadel Graduate College. Approximately 30 percent of those 3,200 total students are undergraduate majors within the business school or participate in the School's "flex MBA" program. The MBA program typically has a total enrollment between 220 and 280 students taking courses in the evening or in an online environment. The MBA program is well-established within the community with a number of distinguished community members holding Citadel MBA degrees. The program also benefits from strong relationships with area employers with numerous students sponsored by the leading employers of the region.

Like other universities attempting to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage over their peers (Nash & Green, 2000), The Citadel School of Business has recognized the need to prepare graduates to enter into an ever changing professional environment and become leaders of their respective industries. The challenge, as discussed in "From periphery to core: The increasing relevance of experiential learning in undergraduate business education" (Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014) lies within the pressure of major universities to not only emphasize the importance of research-based teachings, but also to produce graduates with applicable skills capable of leading and managing organizations. This pressure is to close the knowing-gap, defined as, "the critical difference between what a student knows and what he or she can actually do." (Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014). A widely accepted solution is to encourage students to participate in experiential courses and imbedded projects to prepare them to be the leaders and decision makers once they enter into the work force (Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014). Experiential projects also help students assess potential career paths and learn specific skills they will need when they start their career (Sprague and Percy, 2014).

While the value of experiential learning is widely supported by the research, it is important to recognize that not all experiential learning projects are created equal. A truly successful experiential learning experience should benefit both the student group as well as the client organization. The student should leave the collaboration with added industry knowledge, confidence to execute the skills and strategies they've been taught, as well contacts within the industry that they can network with in the future. The client should leave the collaboration with applicable strategies and next steps, but should also leave the experience with a positive feeling towards the university and a sense of community engagement from having shared their personal skills and experiences with a new generation of business professionals.

In order to achieve the above, build upon strong community relationships, and enhance The Citadel brand as a quality institution with outstanding students, a course entitled "Strategic Consulting Experience" was developed. The course has been offered for approximately seven years and resulted in over 200 MBA students providing consulting services for over 50 clients. The course was designed to provide students with opportunities to work with external clients to assist them with strategic issues facing their organizations. While the benefits of the course are numerous, the primary benefit to the student is practical experience in solving real-world problems using skills acquired through their MBA program. In addition, the clients receive, at no cost to them, consulting services from students who may bring fresh and innovative perspectives to their organizations. A resultant benefit to The Citadel School of Business is an enhanced image within the external business community due to the positive interaction between students, faculty, and clients.

COURSE STRUCTURE

The course is offered over the entire 15 week semester. While each project is tailored to the specific needs of each client, each consulting team uses this time to study its client's organization and environment, gather and analyze relevant documents and data, and make recommendations to management. Project outcomes are communicated to management through oral presentations and a written final report. The size of a consulting team may vary with the complexity of the project and the size of the class, but typically is limited to 3 or 4 students. To maintain consistency with expectations for classroom-based courses, each student is expected to work on the project 8-10 hours per week for the entire semester. This includes visits to the client's facility, on- and off-site gathering and analysis of data, presentations and report preparation, and the team's own planning meetings and project management.

Projects are chosen that can provide students with meaningful real-world experience and make a significant contribution to client organizations. Students are selected for consulting projects based on competence, interest, and suitability to undertake the work involved. Students work in teams, cooperating among themselves to exploit their collective skills, experience and effectiveness. Business graduate faculty supervise and assist the consulting teams. Students are encouraged to make use of all resources available through the university, community, and federal, state and local government agencies. The design and administration of the consulting projects reflects the belief that groups of senior graduate business students have the competence, maturity and integrity to undertake significant work in the community, can take responsibility for the conduct of the work, and can attain the standards of excellence of The Citadel and the graduate business program. The projects also reflect the belief that cooperation and teamwork provide a better vehicle for significant accomplishment in a complex environment than does individual competitive effort.

PROJECT REQUIRMENTS

Each graduate student project team is expected to:

- Negotiate with the client organization an understanding of the objectives, nature, scope and anticipated outcomes of the project.
- Draft, for the instructor's signature, a letter of engagement describing the nature, scope and limitations of services to be performed, the responsibilities of the parties, target dates and milestones, and reports and/or other items deliverable to the client. Identify any costs to be billed to the client and provide detailed estimates of the amounts involved.
- Develop a plan for accomplishing the project's objectives for the instructor's approval.
- Assign responsibilities to individual members of the team and monitor progress toward accomplishing project objectives.
- Conduct studies, gather data, perform analyses, examine alternatives, and make decisions necessary to meet the project objectives.
- Maintain working papers documenting the work performed and providing a basis for the team's recommendations and reports.
- Provide informal progress reports to the instructor on a weekly basis and notify the instructor of appointments to meet with senior personnel in the client organization.
- Keep the principal client contact informed about progress and brief him or her before all formal presentations.
- Make a preliminary oral presentation to the client midway through the project. This presentation is intended to report progress, identify obstacles and propose solutions, and if necessary, suggest modifications to the objectives and/or scope of the project.
- Make a final oral presentation to the client summarizing project outcomes and explaining and justifying recommendations. This presentation will be attended by the instructor and any other faculty who are involved with the project.
- Prepare a final written report for submission to the client by the School of Business Administration.

MANAGING CLIENT INTERACTION AND EXPECTATIONS

With respect to developing external project-based courses, likely the most daunting aspect is dealing with client expectations. In order to maximize the benefit received by all involved with an experiential learning project, it is important to select clients who understand the nature of experiential learning and are willing to open their organizations to students who may need time to "find their way." Empowering students to learn while doing requires faculty who are willing to "facilitate" rather than "direct" and clients who appreciate the learning process. This is normally accomplished by having pre-course meetings between the faculty and clients and providing the client with hand-outs that fully describe the process. It is also important to establish clear expectations by encouraging extensive student-client dialogue during the engagement letter development process. Still, it is important to realize that regardless of faculty efforts at identifying satisfactory clients and projects, faculty should be aware of client characteristics that are less than desirable.

Possible "difficult client" characteristics:

- Not a single person - Your client is actually an entire committee and, unfortunately, getting the entire committee on the same page seems impossible.
- Unrealistic Expectations – For whatever reason, your client's expectations surpass your capabilities.
- Know it all – Your client feels such passion for their business that they already feel as though they are masters in their field and are unreceptive to suggestions involving anything outside of their comfort zone.
- Clueless but desperate – They don't have any idea what they need, but they know that their business needs help
- Impatient – They want results immediately and have little concern for your own calendar/schedule
- Don't value your input – Even though they agreed to work with your group, a client may feel that

students are not going to be able to provide any valuable insight and may not respect the group's time or recommendations. This type of "difficult client" looks at their role in this collaboration as more of a community service project, allowing your students to learn to work with clients, without expecting anything of value in return.

Regardless of the type of "difficult client" your group might face, communication is the key to overcoming group/client conflicts. Communication needs to happen on three levels, starting with written documentation. As stated earlier in this paper, an engagement letter needs to be created, approved by the supervising instructor, and then signed by the client. This document will be created after the group has met with the client and their instructor. It is important that an initial meeting takes place where expectations are set and this document serves as a reminder to all parties what those expectations are. This will outline expectations of the study, specify deliverables and dates, and include the class schedule. It is important for the class schedule to be included so that clients understand that it isn't just their timetable that needs to be considered. If meetings are postponed or extensions are requested, it could run the timetable outside of the confines of the class schedule and the client needs to understand that although the group is flexible with dates, this is still part of a class and the university has deadlines to consider.

Along with the written documentation, communication needs to take place and continue between the student group and the client. A minimum of three meetings should take place between the two parties. The first meeting should have the goal of learning about the client, understanding their needs, and communicating the value you have as a group. At this meeting, expectations should be set and recorded in the engagement letter. A second meeting should take place further into the project to check in with the client, collect any additional client information that might be needed, and continue to build a relationship with the client. A side goal of each meeting should be to establish a relationship with the client and create more of a collaboration feeling instead of a vendor/client dynamic. Creating a positive and professional relationship will not only help in terms of opening up the flow of communication, but will also be beneficial to any members of the group that might want to use the client as a resource in the future. A third meeting should take place towards the end of the project, just prior to the final report, to make sure they have created an output that will be most valuable to the client. While additional meetings and calls between the two groups could be beneficial, and are certainly not forbidden, you must make sure to recognize that too many meetings/calls may start to drain on the client's time and create a sense of burden when dealing with your group (Sprague & Hu, 2015). Balance needs to be maintained between good communication and respect for the client's time, which is why three meetings is the recommendation.

The final level of communication that needs to take place is between the client and the instructor. At the pre-course meeting between the potential client and instructor, the discussion needs to focus on the needs of the client as well as the limitations of the class. While emphasizing the benefit of having a group of this caliber provide consultation services, an acknowledgment also needs to be made that this is still an experiential learning exercise and that certain limitations might exist. At the conclusion of this initial meeting, the instructor should also let it be known that although the students are empowered to work independently, course faculty will be facilitating the project and available to discuss any concerns that might arise.

CONCLUSIONS, LESSONS LEARNED, AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

While the previous section takes on a negative tone in describing characteristics of difficult clients, it should not be concluded that this represents more than a small minority of the clients who participate in the course. The authors' experiences in dealing with clients indicate that the vast majority of clients are extremely supportive of student needs and course objectives. Feedback in a variety of forms is collected from clients at the completion of the projects and the most common response is "I hope they all are receiving A's." One client has reported that a decision-tool to guide expansion efforts was used for several years after the project. Another reported that the student team's recommendations were accepted in total and resulted in the development of a new residency program that was very successful. Yet another client reported that his organization had accepted and implemented the student team's recommendations to discontinue an initiative they felt to be flawed but that had already incurred significant "sunk costs."

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to effectively monitor the strategic and economic impact of student consulting projects due to the nature of the recommendations and the long timeframes that they often include. However, with AACSB International's increasing emphasis on impact relative to accreditation standards, the authors are attempting to develop better reporting mechanisms to detail project outcomes. It should also be noted that the course described in this paper is used as a capstone experience for a limited number of graduating MBA students who apply for this option as opposed to a traditional lecture oriented capstone. Proposals are being considered to modify the course to allow for larger numbers of students to be included so that it may become the required capstone for all graduating MBA students.

Finally, please note that this paper provides necessary, but not sufficient information for those wishing to develop similar experiential opportunities for students in their MBA programs. Copies of course syllabi, student and client handouts, and other useful course documents will be provided by the authors upon request.

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