

SMALL BUSINESS BRIEF

FIELD CASE CONSULTING: TEN KEYS FOR SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

One AACSB accredited College of Business and Economics believes so strongly in the value of student consulting that it requires all of its graduating MBA students to consult. For ten years, its MBA student consulting teams have achieved consistently high ratings in national field case competitions. This business brief explains why and how this curriculum component was instituted, and identifies ten keys for success. It also offers useful background information for those interested in launching a similar program. The authors note that they have also applied the ten keys successfully to undergraduate student consulting.

INTRODUCTION

Student field case consulting is an important way for business schools to provide practical training to its students, expose faculty to current issues facing small business, and to introduce new, technology, resources and strategies to small business owners. It is a win-win process where all those involved gain a better appreciation of what it takes to succeed. Students work like apprentices, closely supervised by faculty, and are graded on the practical results they achieve for the client company.

The college had been using written comprehensive examinations to meet its MBA "terminal integrative experience" requirement. These exams were prepared and graded by professors from all business school departments. Students were prepared for the exams in an integrative, capstone course. The capstone course combined team involvement in a business simulation game with topical reviews of the various business disciplines. Student's class work was graded by the professor.

THINKING ABOUT A BETTER WAY

On the surface, this process seemed to work fairly well. Students appeared to gain insight from the capstone course and the pass rate on the comprehensive exams was high. Even so, the common perception concerning the terminal experience was there was considerable room for improvement. Four reasons for this perception were:

- The increasing preoccupation of the students with the comprehensive examination as its date approached

- Professors found it difficult to draft questions that allowed students to demonstrate their mastery of business administration, as opposed to specific business tools
- Assessing mastery based on the student's written responses proved troublesome
- Students had difficulty exhibiting mastery of the subject matter during the time allowed to take the exam, leaving the examination rooms feeling frustrated, questioning the relevancy of the exam, and disappointed by the limited leeway it allowed for them to "show their stuff"

A review defined the ideal experience as one which would achieve seven objectives:

- Maximize the retention of essential analytical tools
- Permit students to develop mastery (learn by doing)
- Allow students to apply their newly learned business skills to realistic, dynamic business environments at the company level, as opposed to the department level
- Give students the additional motivation and satisfaction that comes from using what one knows to help others
- Channel the tremendous review effort made by the students into results that made an immediate and useful impact on the productivity of the small business community
- Assure timely completion of degree requirements by degree candidates
- Allow for efficient utilization of faculty resources

Using these benchmarks to define the desired, or ideal experience, it became apparent that the traditional masters thesis would also fall short as a solution. Previous experience suggested that most students would be unable to complete a thesis in a timely manner. Second, implementation of a thesis requirement was viewed as a costly administrative alternative. Finally, many questioned the thesis as an effective learning medium for an MBA degree.

MECHANICS OF THE NEW PROGRAM

The college saw utilizing student consulting ("live" field casework) in the capstone course as a better fit to the above mentioned benchmarks. Working on student consulting, following Small Business Institute (SBI) guidelines, seemed to be a nearly perfect solution. The critical assumption was that consulting could be integrated appropriately into the terminal experience.

As it turned out, the only significant changes required in the usual SBI consulting process were in final reporting and the grading procedure. The normal SBI report is a group report in which the contributions of individual students are blended together seamlessly for presentation to the client. This is very desirable for presentation purposes, but does not facilitate evaluation of each team member's mastery of all business disciplines. In addition to the group report, we require individual student reports (not seen by the clients) that evaluate the entire consulting experience. Also, we require more than a grade assigned by the course professor. Other faculty independently review the reports to confirm mastery.

Our experience shows that an approach to MBA terminal experience requirements, utilizing student consulting, enhances learning and opens a floodgate of valuable consulting to small businesses. For those interested in following such an approach, we offer ten keys for success.

TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS

1. Prepare a well laid out course structure.

Four structural elements must be in place to assure the field consulting experience consistently goes well:

- A clear and detailed course syllabus
- An explicit packet of consulting project guidelines
- Prearranged communication networks
- Prepared handouts

2. Guide team selection, but leave the final choice of members to the students.

Attempt to build student teams that are both balanced and cohesive. The best teams are those that have the diversity of student skills and experiences necessary to carry out a comprehensive client analysis. This includes expertise in not only various business functional and technical areas, but also other skills useful in case consulting such as leadership, formal and interpersonal communication skills, and creativity.

3. Make a strong effort, year round, to identify, qualify and update the client pool.

To consistently provide meaningful learning, it is critical that a high quality pool of potential consulting clients be developed and managed. Set minimum criteria and stick to them. Five criteria we use are: ten employees; \$1,000,000 in sales; openness by the owner to a comprehensive review of the company; up to date, monthly financial statements; and permission by the owner to review and analyze financial statements. Allow students to make the final choice of clients. Freedom of choice pays dividends later on in the consulting process in terms of team interest and motivation.

4. Manage client expectations.

Prior to selection, educate potential clients about live case consulting and prepare them for working with student teams. Have students present their resumes during the first meeting with the client. Ensure that students share details of the field case consulting process with their clients during the first interview (structural deadlines, resource needs, forecasted consulting deliverables). Have teams write up a formal letter of engagement detailing the scope of work, time line, and tangible output of the project. Insist students communicate frequently with the client (both oral and written), and if possible, deliver preliminary work product to the client early in the engagement. Once the client samples the quality of the team's work, greater client cooperation follows.

5. Manage student teams.

Encourage teams to practice what they have learned in their MBA courses in regards to managing groups, leadership, teamwork, communication skills, and project management. Request each team to plan and schedule the consulting project using some form of project management software. Ask teams to structure tasks so that each student has both a primary and secondary area of functional responsibility. This helps smooth the overall quality of the final work product, leads to better integration of functional plans, and provides students with an opportunity to learn from each other's expertise. Finally, establish a formal structure of reporting team progress to the professor. Have each consulting team designate one member to be the primary liaison with the client and the professor. This helps minimize inefficiencies and redundancies in the communication process, and leads to better management of client relationships.

6. As supervising professor, be a facilitator and coach.

As facilitator, the professor provides supporting functions. The professor identifies key areas of focus for the projects and reinforces the need to tie theory and practice together throughout the consulting engagement. The professor also identifies key resources helpful in completing the projects, and provides students with background on the role of small business consultant. The professor should stress the need to provide clients with practical suggestions and solutions that will actually be used. As coach, the professor is both a motivator and guide. It is important to be available to provide support, but it is also important to make it clear, to both the consulting teams and the clients, that the primary consulting responsibilities lie with the students.

7. Ensure that outputs are of consistent high quality.

Make available a library of the best previous reports, but limit distribution so that each new team has to develop its own "product" that "raises the bar." Give short lectures that focus teams on key functional elements of the work project, and on important content frameworks to be used in the consulting assignment. Hold progress report meetings. At mid term, make teams responsible for formally presenting their work to the entire class for critique and help. Build in several levels of review and evaluation. In addition to preliminary and final evaluation of the projects by the supervising professor, submit reports to faculty review. Also, submit case reports to judging by independent experts. Competing locally and nationally serves as an external quality check.

8. Use technology to improve the efficiency of student-consulting management and the quality of output.

Make pervasive use of e-mail and fax to communicate. Use the supervising professor's Home Page as an efficient vehicle to disseminate course related information quickly and easily. Use interactive, Web-based software, such as Blackboard and WebCT, to support efficient collaboration allowing students to share ideas and issues across teams. Provide on-line access to other university and Internet resources including library materials, search engines, and computer databases such as Lexis Nexis.

9. Celebrate success and protect the culture.

When a program extracts a tremendous amount of high quality work from student consulting teams, there is a strong need to reinforce and reward. Since there is no direct financial reward to the students, celebrate their efforts and accomplishments in other ways. Many students find the student consulting experience to be the highlight of their MBA program. They appreciate the variety of types of learning and enjoy the peer group interaction. Spread this spirit by sharing the results of the capstone experience with incoming and current students. Over time, MBA's will come to look forward to the student consulting experience and elevate their commitment to carry on the tradition of excellence established by their predecessors.

10. As a school, commit to success and allocate the necessary funding.

If one wants a sustainable MBA student consulting experience, one cannot expect the supervising professor to do everything. Faculty and functional departments must help. Faculty who teach student consulting courses will certainly find the workload involved heavy. All departments need to cooperate in providing advisors to student teams when needed. Academic departments, in addition to providing advisors, also need to assign faculty to help evaluate the final work products of the consulting teams. Such school wide commitment does

not just happen. Someone at the top has to take the lead and continually remind all concerned about the benefits of student consulting. In addition to commitment, building a successful MBA student consulting program requires funding to pay for staff members that recruit clients, perform client screening, maintain resource libraries, reimburse student out-of-pocket expenses, and conduct case competitions and award ceremonies. However, this does not mean that student consulting need be a drain on financial resources. For example, at our college, student consulting has become self sufficient by charging clients small fixed fees based on company size.

CONCLUSION

We conclude from our ten years of experience that business programs using student consulting in the MBA terminal experience will be improving their MBA program. At the same time, they will improve their ability to help local small businesses. Following the ten keys given in this article, one can create a high energy, effective learning experience that is also efficient to administer and cost effective. From the student's perspective, the stakes are high (it's *their* MBA), and the activity is *real!* They have the opportunity to "show their stuff." It's tremendously motivating. From the college's perspective, the students develop mastery ("learn by doing") and make an immediate and useful impact on local business. At the same time, the "safety net" provided by the course structure assures timely completion of degree requirements and allows for efficient utilization of faculty resources.

Undergraduate Program Application

We note that the ten keys given in this article also work well in undergraduate courses. Student consulting is available as an option in our undergraduate business policy course, and is required in our entrepreneurial management emphasis. To achieve good results, only minor adjustments need to be made in the ten keys. For Key 3, we select smaller companies for the undergraduate client pool (three to nine employees and/or less than \$1,000,000 in sales). For Key 7, we require each undergraduate team member to submit two rough drafts of their portion of the consulting report. The professor edits the drafts and makes specific requests for more work. Finally, for Key 10, we charge a smaller fixed fee based on the smaller size of the client firm.

Please e-mail the authors to receive free copies of an information packet that includes in-depth discussion of the ten keys, the course syllabus for the college's capstone course, and the consulting report guidelines.

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