

SMALL BUSINESS BRIEF

**QUALITY FIELD CASE CONSULTING:
NEW PROGRAM POSSIBILITIES**

Ronald G. Cook
Rider University
cookr@rider.edu

INTRODUCTION

In the last issue, Michael Ames and Paul Hugstad described the field case consulting model required in California State University (CSU) Fullerton's capstone MBA course. As noted, they use the Small Business Institute™ (SBI) model for this course. The CSU program has completed over 850 SBI projects in the last 20 years and has consistently ranked high in national competitions. The obvious success of the CSU program is to be commended.

But what can you do if you don't have a large, well-established SBI program? Can a newer program compete successfully in these field case competitions? Can a school run a successful small SBI program? Based on my experience, the answer is yes.

The Rider program is one example. It is small and focused. It only works with a few firms each year and is selective in which students are accepted into the program. This focused approach has produced high quality cases for small businesses, as evidenced by three top ten finishes in the SBIDA national undergraduate competition in the last three years and one undergraduate national champion. The SBI program at Rider was started in 1994 at the undergraduate level, and recently expanded to the graduate level.

PROGRAM GUIDELINES

For new (or existing) programs that want to provide a high quality field case consulting experience and will remain small, I offer a few suggestions for undergraduate programs:

1. Be student selective.

Offer the SBI program to a selected student population through a permission-of-instructor procedure. Require students to have taken a pre-requisite course so you have some idea of their capabilities, and have a basis for selecting participants.

2. Offer the SBI program as an elective course.

This follows recommendation one in that you can not be selective in choosing students if this is a required course. Further, having the SBI program as a separate course also allows the professor to count it towards their teaching load.

3. Be selective with the client pool.

We do not use size criteria in this process. Rather, we ensure that the clients are established firms or organizations (been in business for two or more years) that are what we call "ready, willing and able."

Ready means that the CEO/owner and any key personnel are available to meet with the students. They are not traveling on business or otherwise out of touch. This availability is critical in a project that will have to be finished in a semester.

Willing is the ability of the firm to share all relevant information with a student team. The ability of the students to do an effective job will be hindered if a firm refuses to share its data.

Able means that a firm recognizes that the Rider SBI program operates on an academic calendar and that a student team may not be available when a client approaches the University. Firms must be able to wait if students are not available when a firm makes its request.

4. Gain commitment from your school to run a small program.

At Rider, the SBI Director recruits companies, selects students, provides the infrastructure and teaches the SBI class. In this system, one must be a jack-of-all-trades. Despite the amount of work this entails, it can be easier to operate in this mode because you do have a measure of control over all program elements. However, in order to be able to do that, one must limit the number of cases supervised. Therefore, you need the support of your school in order to teach a small class, perhaps smaller than you would otherwise have in your normal teaching load.

5. Make extensive use of technology.

Students use e-mail to communicate with the professor, and web-based software (Blackboard) to communicate in virtual chats, exchange files, and manage their project teams. Examples of past projects are available on line, and research assistance is provided through our library. Rider's SBI also has its own web site (www.Rider.edu/SBI), which has links to other online research resources.

6. Program funding

The program is supported by donations from the client firms and by local corporate sponsors. The voluntary support has worked well in our circumstance and clients almost always make a donation. Our web site also allows sponsors to gain additional publicity, above and beyond the usual recognition on brochures and reports. Charging a fee is also a viable option for programs, although in our case, we have never done so.

7. Consulting is about managing ambiguity.

The consulting process can be somewhat unsettling, as many issues do not have a clear-cut solution. Help manage that ambiguity with a solid course design. Web-based software, an on-line library of examples and a detailed syllabus are provided to the students. In addition, one-on-one meetings between the student teams and professor occur regularly throughout the semester, focusing on potential issues and problem areas.

CONCLUSION

I agree with the Ames and Hugstad Ten Keys to Success points, as noted in the last issue, with some modifications for smaller programs. What I have tried to do here is offer additional guidelines that may make sense for schools and faculty that either start or choose to run a focused, selective program, at the undergrad level. At the graduate level, the main difference is that we eliminate the permission-of-instructor procedure. In our limited experience, this has not caused us any difficulties.

Finally, I believe one can offer a quality SBI program regardless of the school's size. Programs can be tailored to suit the needs of the local community, and the resources and desires of the school and faculty. As the Director of an award-winning SBI program, I can testify firsthand what the benefits are to being a national finalist and a national champion, as well as the goodwill that has been established in our community from our outreach activities. If you are not running an SBI program, please give it a try. I think you will find the benefits outstanding. (For further information on starting a Small Business Institute™ program, go to www.SBIDA.org)

Dr. Ronald G. Cook is an associate professor of small business/entrepreneurship at the College of Business, Rider University, and the director of Rider's Small Business Institute™. His student consulting projects (Small Business Institute™ program) have won national titles, and he has extensive consulting experience with small firms. His current research interests are on business plans, and micro-enterprise training.