

ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT IN PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT CLASSES THROUGH FIELD-BASED CONSULTING PROJECTS

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Abstract

In today's environment of outcome assessments, combined with the high cost to students for their education, universities are under increasing pressure to develop students into productive members of society. Students are under pressure to start their career. This paper explores the benefits and challenges of restructuring a standard undergraduate management course into one that not only teaches business management principles, but requires students to use their talents and business knowledge as business consultants in the real world. This redesign was a remarkable success by all measurements. Highly motivated students who use their newly

learned business principles in an active and engaged collaborative manner will see their education in a new light.

Keywords: business education, management principles, engagement, field research, consulting.

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INTRODUCTION

Real business experience that a college student can highlight on a resume for future employment opportunities can take many forms. A college student could undertake a paid or volunteer internship, perhaps do a shadowing experience for a day or a longer period, or be successful in obtaining an entry level part time job in their field of study. While these are all suitable opportunities for students, completing a successful, high profile strategic consulting project for a real business in the community can provide the highest reward on many levels (Cook, 2013).

This paper explores the benefits and challenges of restructuring a standard undergraduate management course into one that not only teaches business management principles, but requires students to use their talents and business knowledge as business consultants in the real world. This redesign was a remarkable success by all measurements. Highly motivated students who use their newly learned business principles in an active and engaged collaborative manner will see their education in a new light. They developed a sense of self-worth and learned the value of maximizing each other's talents as they worked in teams. Students could see the relevancy in what they were learning and were motivated to achieve success. This analysis is based on 240 student evaluations over three semesters and comments from the clients on the first three consulting projects. While case studies, business games, and internships serve their specific purposes in business education, none can match the rewards of completing a fieldwork consulting project for a major

corporation or developing a plan to benefit the community's tourism industry (Heriot, 2007).

DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS PROGRAMS

Overview

The education of business students has progressed significantly over time. Initial business programs were strictly textbook and lecture based. Harvard University is credited with changing business education in the early 1900's. To better prepare its graduate students, it began developing and using case study method which is still utilized today by nearly every business program. In the case study method, students are expected to analyze the case study and prepare to discuss strategies and tactics that the firm should employ to resolve the issue at hand.

In addition to case studies, business programs began to include internships and cooperative opportunities (co-ops) for students. Students utilizing what they learned in the classroom can apply their knowledge in a one semester part-time job with an employer. Melding theory with practice would strengthen the skills and confidence of students and make them more employable upon graduation.

Today, to fulfill an institutional mandate or a requirement of an accrediting organization, an increasing number of business programs have developed a capstone course for senior business students. It provides a final opportunity to integrate all of the students' coursework and prepare them for the workforce by refining the students' application skills. It assesses whether students can effectively utilize the knowledge they attained to solve business issues. While most capstone courses utilize the case study method, some are moving towards using an experiential project concept (Simons, 2016).

In today's environment of outcome assessments, combined with the high cost to students for their education, universities are under increasing

pressure to develop students into productive members of society (Cook, 2013). Clearly, education needs to be more than just obtaining textbook knowledge (Geho, 2015). A good GPA is only the starting point. Employers are looking for proof of leadership and the candidates that can handle the stress of multi-tasking successfully. These skills can be demonstrated by student club officer roles, successfully completing challenging co-ops, or being active in sports combined with excellent grades. Some students are able to demonstrate leadership by their charitable activities in the community. Every meaningful activity that can be highlighted on a resume enhances their employability.

Co-ops

Co-ops provide students with many benefits. They expose students to what will be expected in the workplace once they graduate. Students observe how business people speak, behave, and dress in the workplace while understanding the work environment. It gives them an opportunity to use what they have already learned and encourages them to strive for knowledge in areas where they feel deficient. They return to campus with renewed effort and interest in their studies. Students gain confidence in their abilities as they complete required tasks for their employer. An effective co-op provides the student with valuable, hands-on knowledge that cannot be learned in the classroom. What to do or not do in one's job is difficult to demonstrate in the classroom. Even more essential is understanding why it needs to be done in a particular way.

A strategic component in the hiring process is the use of co-ops as an extended interview or observation period. While the concept of co-ops makes sense in theory, application of the knowledge learned in the classroom in a work environment is very difficult to achieve (Schaafsma, 1996). Most employers are not of the academic mindset. They have a specific position that needs to be filled, and with minimal training they expect the intern to fully perform the day to day operational tasks. Unless there is an opportunity for learning "the why" part of the tasks, it is difficult to understand how this can be a truly learning environment for

the student. For example, in a tax/accounting internship, a student will take an assortment of data from a client and enter it into a tax software program. While some learning takes place at the initial stage of the co-op, it is difficult to argue that the repetitive nature of the work can continue to be meaningful.

A valuable co-op should involve mentoring, where the student works side by side with someone at the executive level on all issues and decisions that the executive must deal with for a full semester (Schaafsma, 1996). The student intern would study each issue and meet with the executive to discuss his or her findings. In return the executive would explain how they arrived at their solution and discuss why one alternative should be selected over the other.

Consulting projects

If the ultimate goal of the university, department, or professor is creating an active, integrative course that takes students outside of their comfort zone and forces them to apply their knowledge to solve real issues and to learn how to effectively work in teams, then a carefully planned strategic consulting project out in the community can be the answer (Hoffman, 2016). An effective consulting project also benefits the university by increasing its reputation as a center of excellence, the businesses served, and the local community (Scigmpaglia, 2010).

Key steps in developing a successful student consulting program include:

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