“Establishing field-based consulting experience for MBA students: Lessons learned by a small-sized university”

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ESTABLISHING FIELD-BASED CONSULTING EXPERIENCE FOR MBA STUDENTS: LESSONS LEARNED BY A SMALL-SIZED UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Most major universities expect MBA students to take a full-course load each term. Also, as a condition of graduation, MBA students must work full-time in small teams on focused-based consulting (FBC) projects for large-sized corporations. After being given the assignment and deadline, team members work tirelessly to complete their project. Such experiences facilitate the transition of major universities' MBA students into the real business world. On the other hand, most MBA students at small-sized universities work full-time for a company during the day and take one or two courses in the evening each semester. Despite these constraints, Indiana University Kokomo (IUK) (Kokomo, Indiana, USA) was able to successfully develop and implement a required MBA-level FBC course (C599). In addition to having a positive influence on IUK's MBA students, this course has had a significant impact upon the economic development of small-sized firms in northcentral Indiana. This paper chronicles the "trials and tribulations" the School of Business encountered in creating and executing C599. After presenting representative comments from client companies and MBA students, six implementation problems with C599 are discussed along with subsequent modifications. Finally, suggestions for small-sized universities like IUK who want to develop and implement their own MBA consultative course are presented.

Keywords MBA consultative course, field-based consulting, experiential learning projects, active-learning projects, business case-based curricula

JEL Classification M00, M10

INTRODUCTION

For decades, business schools used cases as their primary teaching method in capstone MBA courses (e.g., Erzurumlu & Rollag, 2013; Christensen, 1981). This approach was viewed as superior to the heretofore standard lecture method, because it exposed MBA students to real-world business situations in the classroom (e.g., Pariseau & Kezin, 2007; Hammond, 2002; Corey, 1998). However, as summarized by Erzurumlu and Rollag (2013, p. 361): While the traditional case-based teaching method is a powerful instructional approach (Christensen, 1981), it does have its challenges. Standard, multi-page business cases may express exceedingly rational and orderly views of the organiza-tion (Bonoma, 1989) and focus students on the application of an ab-stract method to a very stylized situation (Argyris, 1980). Cases are often used to lead students through a well-honed analysis to a prede-termined set of conclusions (Cohen, 1989; Argyris, 1980), a process that may not engage students to develop novel ways of thinking and prepare them for messy real-life problems (Bigelow, 1995). Students

may also feel confined to the information in the case, limit their search for answers to the boundaries of the case, and follow the instructor's guidance too closely, hence neglecting opportunities to sufficiently develop their own problem-solving skills (Stubbart, 1989).

Furthermore, Thaker (2015, p. 232) states: "According to Mintzberg and Gosling (2002), Pfeiffer and Fong (2002), and Datar, Garvin, and Cullen (2010), case-based curricula at business schools often fall short in enabling students to fully appreciate organizational reality, in offering hands-on experience on effective implementation and in problem finding, problem facing and working in unstructured contexts and situations."

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

An increasing body of literature and research has recently focused upon and been conducted on "field-based consulting" (FBC). Field-based consulting is different from experiential learning and active-learning projects.[1] In FBC, small groups of MBA students work together as consulting teams to solve corporations' business-related problems. "By experiencing the consultation process, students are required to integrate all they have learned in their prior (MBA) education to bring relevant tools to their consulting engagement" (Sciglimpaglia & Toole, 2010, p. 70). While the general purpose of FBC is to better prepare MBA students for the real business world, the primary purpose, as stated by Erzurumlu and Rollag (2013, p. 361), is "… to improve students' cognitive abilities as well as their capacity to apply new skills and knowledge to real-life situations and their ability to become self-directed learners (Boggs et al., 2007; Kolb & Kolb, 2006)."

Datar et al. (2010) surveyed deans of leading American Schools of Business as well as CEOs of major corporations regarding the active-learning projects these universities' MBA students performed for companies. Both executives and deans indicated "field-based consulting" (FBC):

[P]rojects were the best vehicle for developing self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and ethical sensitivity. … [C]ritical leadership capabilities … are best learned by doing …, [which] requires immersion in challenging real-world projects. … 'Managers learn leadership skills by practice and observation, and therefore, learn most from direct work experiences.' … Within MBA programs, this would require teams of students to work together for extended periods in the field, under the oversight of faculty members and executive sponsors, collectively framing problems, assembling and analyzing data, assigning and completing tasks, brainstorming solutions, and preparing and presenting … their recommendations. … Moreover, the coupling of collective responsibility with concrete deliverables, pressing timelines, and demanding clients would elicit many of the same behaviors – and dysfunctions – that one encounters in the workplace, providing students with rich opportunities for learning real-world leadership skills (pp. 88-89).[2]

As part of this undertaking, Datar et al. (2010) developed three learning objectives – Knowing, Doing, and Being – involving complex skills for MBA FBC. These are detailed below:

- "Knowing:
  - understanding the limits of markets and models;
  - developing thinking skills: critical thinking, and integrative thinking.

1 For additional information, refer to: Tavanti and Wilp (2018); Awaysheh and Bonfiglio (2017); Eckhaus, Klein, and Kantar (2017); LeMaire, Kirk, and Watson (2017); Waller, Reitz, Poole, Riddell, and Muir (2017); Akpan (2016); Green and Williams (2016); Hoffman, Becktold, Murphy, and Snyman (2016); Schwering (2015); Erzurumlu and Rollag (2013); Roche, Downie, and Diriker (2013); Sroufe and Ramos (2011); Datar, Garvin, and Cullen (2010); Sciglimpaglia and Toole (2010); Chou (2009), Heriot, Cook, Jones, and Simpson (2008); Ames (2006); Auster and Wylie (2006); Cook and Belliveau (2006); Kolb and Kolb (2006); Bigelow(2004); Mintzberg (2004); Henderson, Sciglimpaglia, and Toole (2003); Kunkel (2002); Mintzberg and Gosling (2002); Doran, Sciglimpaglia, and Toole (2001); Cook (2000); Bigelow, Selzer, van Buskirk, Schor, Garcia, and Keleman (1999); Duch, Allen, and White (1998); West and Aupperle (1996); and Bigelow (1995).

2 "The educational process is about lifelong learning and equipping the student with the skills to handle ambiguous situations. Consulting fieldwork does just that" (Cook & Belliveau, 2006, p. 186).

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- Doing:
  - creative and innovative thinking as well as problem finding and framing;
  - understanding of organizational reality.
- Being:
  - greater attention to personal development (i.e., human dimensions);
  - role and responsibility of business in society;
  - understanding how to motivate and connect with a cross-section of hierarchy and functions in the organization."

Additional benefits other than those previously mentioned from "field-based consulting" can be forthcoming to MBA students, faculty, the university, school of business, and clients, which are described by Sroufe and Ramos (2011): "Not only do our students and faculty collaborate with practitioners on contemporary industry problem solving, they advance opportunities for academic research and enhanced pedagogy. MBA student teams collect primary data relevant for academic research that expands understanding of management implications. Knowledge dissemination starts with our clients and is expanded through academic conferences and publications. Ideas regarding new business models, solutions, and opportunities come from student teams, clients, and faculty" (p. 367).

2. DISCUSSION

The MBA program at Indiana University Kokomo (IUK) was launched in Fall 1992. The instructor of the capstone course had taught a similar course for many years at another university, which was significantly larger in size and more established than IUK. Early in his academic career, he had established a relationship with the Small Business Institute (SBI). Over the years, teams of MBA students in his capstone course prepared comprehensive business plans for numerous large-sized Midwestern companies, including consumer- and industrial-firms, as well as non-profit organizations.

After arriving at IUK, he continued to use resources of the SBI and required MBA students to develop business plans for area firms as part of their capstone course (J560). As with his previous experience at a much larger institution, this benefitted local companies in northcentral Indiana, most of which were very small in size. Because of the business plans developed by J560 teams, several of these firms became successful and expanded. For example, by implementing the recommendations of one group of MBA students, a local food caterer tripled its sales within a few years. Recently, it became the exclusive preparer and provider of meals for students, staff, and faculty in IUK's cafeteria as well as for all university-related events (e.g., banquets, receptions, and commencements). In another instance, an area floral shop was advised by a J560 consulting team to extend its product line beyond flowers (e.g., candy) and advertise via social media. After it did so, sales increased to the point where the firm was able to purchase its own delivery van. Since then, the floral shop has expanded the size of its store, added more new products to its line, and bought a second van.

Despite "success stories" like these, the small size of IUK's MBA program and lack of qualified instructors prevented it from offering J560 more than once a year. Therefore, firms that wanted assistance during other times of the year were unable to obtain it. This also resulted in more requests than IUK could service when J560 was offered. Needless to say, this created bad will among several small-sized companies in northcentral Indiana.

In addition, programmatic- and capstone course-related issues emerged. Almost all of IUK's MBA students had full-time jobs; and most took only one course per semester. By the time they enrolled in J560, many of these MBAs had forgotten much of what they had learned in earlier courses. This problem was especially acute among those graduate students who had to complete several prerequisite (Phase I) courses before taking advanced MBA courses, because they had not earned an undergraduate business degree. While J560 was intended to be the capstone course in IUK's MBA program, several students enrolled in this course before completing all of their advanced (or Phase II) courses, because the capstone course was offered only once a year. In some cases, grad-

uate students took J560 the same semester they had been accepted into the MBA program. The primary problem, however, was SBI projects were imbedded within IUK's capstone MBA course. Graduate students who enrolled in J560 were expected to prepare comprehensive business plans for area companies as well as complete several Harvard Business School-type cases and examinations. As a result, these MBA students were unable to devote their full attention and time to these consultative projects, which adversely affected the completeness and quality of the business plans and recommendations prepared by some J560 consulting teams. In turn, firms were not able to implement the "best" possible business plans and receive maximum benefit.

2.1. Development of MBA consultative course

For the previously mentioned reasons, IUK's School of Business faculty wanted to create a separate, more formal, professional, real-world consultative experience for Phase II MBA students. The impetus for doing so emanated from our MBA Director and Curriculum Committee Chair, who attended an AACSB[3] seminar "Redesigning the MBA: A Curriculum Development Symposium", March 25-26, 2012 in Tampa, Florida. Although presenters were from major universities (e.g., Harvard, Emory, Toronto, North Carolina, Southern California, Minnesota, Case Western Reserve, and Washington), our attendees were exposed to many new trends in MBA curriculum development worthy of consideration for small-sized programs, like ours.

Upon returning to IUK, the MBA Director and Curriculum Committee Chair shared this information with School of Business faculty. Copies of papers from symposium presenters were made available for review. After several School of Business meetings, the faculty agreed to offer a more formal, professional, real-world consultative experience for MBA students near the end of their program, which would be significantly different from the traditional, structured capstone course (J560). In addition, this would be a separate course (C599) required of all graduating MBAs. Finally, while faculty would be assigned to this new course, their role would be merely advisory in nature, which students could utilize, if desired; otherwise, MBA teams would operate on their own volition. The School wanted MBA students' business consultative experience to be as realistic as possible.

The Curriculum Committee was charged with developing this new course as well as preparing a formal proposal and presenting it to the School of Business faculty for consideration early Fall 2012, which it did. Following discussion, the proposal was unanimously endorsed. Faculty further decided this business consultative course (C599) would be launched Spring 2013. It was also determined the MBA Director would be responsible for managing and implementing this new course, which involved locating companies who desired business consulting, developing the appropriate combination of MBA students for each project, securing faculty members to serve as resource individuals, monitoring progress of consulting teams, periodically contacting client firms, and ensuring group reports adequately addressed companies' requests.

2.2. Implementation of new MBA consultative course

Having earned an MBA degree from Indiana University Kokomo, the Director had participated in developing business plans for area organizations as part of several courses. From this experience and ideas garnered from the 2012 AACSB-sponsored Graduate Business Curriculum Development Symposium, the MBA Director decided the initial consultant teams would create a comprehensive business plan for the new course (C599). This would provide a framework for subsequent graduate business consulting groups to follow. Early Spring semester 2013, she met with all members and explained what was expected. As a means to assist them, the Director provided copies of sample business plan outlines as well as business plans she had prepared as a student. After several meetings with the MBA Director, teams began developing a business plan for C599. She interacted with group members on a regular basis in order to monitor their progress, provide guidance, answer questions, etc. By the end of the semester, the business plan was completed.

3 AACSB stands for the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International.

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During late Spring 2013, the MBA Director contacted area firms regarding their interest in having graduate business students complete consulting projects for them free of charge. Once these companies were determined, she met with representatives of each client firm to ascertain their particular needs. Afterwards, the Director developed the optimal mix of graduate students for each company based upon the background of MBAs who had enrolled in the consulting course for Summer 2013.[4] She also designated a leader for each group. The Director then e-mailed this information to each team along with a copy of the comprehensive business plan developed by inaugural C599 groups the prior semester. Last, she secured faculty members to serve as resource individuals.

Prior to meeting their companies, the MBA Director met with consulting groups in masse, explained what was expected (e.g., standard business attire and professional behavior), and answered any questions they had. Individually prepared business cards were distributed. Graduate students were given confidentiality agreements to sign and return to the Director. They were then instructed to maintain a detailed time log.

The MBA Director accompanied each team to their appointed firm, introduced them to company personnel, and observed the interaction between members (especially the leader) and firm officials as the latter explained the purpose, nature, scope, etc. of their consulting project. After this preliminary meeting, she met with the C599 group to ensure they fully understood what the company desired. Once the Director was assured they did, she left the room so they could determine exactly what needed to be done, when, by whom, etc. in order to complete their assignment on time and to the satisfaction of the client.

Throughout Summer 2013, the MBA Director regularly monitored the progress of each consulting team and periodically contacted her liaison with the firm to obtain feedback on their performance. If any company-related issues or concerns emerged, she met with the C599 group to discuss these and develop feasible solutions. Afterwards, the team was to meet with the firm to ascertain the preferred solution, which they then were to subsequently implement. On the other hand, if the issues or concerns were internal in nature, the Director did not become involved.

Before each consulting group submitted its final report to the company, the MBA Director reviewed it to ensure it satisfied the firm's specifications. If it did, she informed the leader, who in turn contacted the company and arranged a mutually agreeable date and time for submission of the report and formal presentation of the results, if desired. On the other hand, if the Director felt the final report was inadequate, she provided suggestions for improvement, and met with the C599 team to discuss these recommended changes. The group then revised its report taking into account her suggestions, and re-submitted it for review. If the MBA Director determined the revised final report met the firm's requirements, she informed the leader, who in turn contacted the company to arrange a mutually agreeable date and time for submission of the final report and formal presentation of the results, if desired.

With C599 not being offered again until Summer 2014 (for reasons mentioned in the previous footnote), the Director was able to concentrate on her graduate business program-related responsibilities for most of the academic year 2013–2014. However, in Fall 2013 and Spring 2014, MBA enrollment increased significantly. As a result, she had to commence contacting firms much sooner than the year before in terms of whether they wanted MBA students to complete consulting projects for them. In addition, the Director had to procure a dramatically larger number of companies for graduate business students during Summer 2014. With having to deal with more consulting groups and firms, the task of servicing the needs of all concerned in the same manner as she had done the previous summer quickly assumed Herculean proportions.

Even before the end of Summer 2014, it became evident C599 was consuming an inordinate amount

4 Because of the small size of IUK's MBA program and limited number of qualified graduate business instructors at the time, Phase II (or advanced) courses were offered only once each academic year. With Phase II MBA courses not being offered during summer, this was the optimal time for us to offer the new business consultative course (C599).

of the MBA Director's time.[5] Hence, she was unable to spend the requisite amount of time visiting area companies, recruiting new graduate business students, preparing promotional materials, etc. At the first School of Business meeting in September 2014, the Director informed faculty the amount of time she was now spending on the graduate business consulting course was preventing her from adequately performing her MBA program-related responsibilities. Fortunately, the new Dean, who had assumed his duties two months earlier, volunteered to handle this course as his required yearly load.

With the new Dean agreeing to teach C599, this permitted the Director to concentrate solely on her graduate program-related responsibilities. It also resulted in a more structured MBA consulting course with consistent offerings throughout the year. Further, it meant there would be only one instructor instead of multiple ones, which some C599 students had previously voiced concerns about with the Director. In addition, it permitted the Dean to interact more closely with Phase II MBA students. Finally, this allowed the new Dean to meet firms in northcentral Indiana and commence establishing relationships with them, which subsequently benefitted the School of Business and IUK in numerous ways (e.g., internships, job offerings, student recruitment, scholarships, etc.).

2.3. Companies' responses to MBA consultative course

The key metric for determining whether the graduate business consultative course was successful was how client companies perceived the performance of MBA students. In general, the overall response from these firms was very positive. Several of these small companies returned for additional consultative business projects. In exit interviews following completion of their C599 project, almost all of these firms indicated they would recommend IUK's MBA consultative services to other companies. Representative comments include the following:

- "The team of MBAs was instrumental in helping us prepare a complete business plan for [a proprietary product], which we can present to potential investors for funding." [Postscript: Based upon the MBA students' report, the company later submitted a funding proposal to a "Shark Tank" competition involving almost 100 firms. A panel of successful entrepreneurs and venture capitalists rated the company's proposal as one of the "Top Five" in the competition. The CEO said "Thanks to the efforts of this team of [IUK] MBAs, we have already been approached by several venture capitalists who are interested in supporting the development and marketing of our new product."]

- "I was very impressed with the effort and result, which was definitely a homerun. I showed the business plan to several people at the yearly national convention of [our profession], and they thought it was fantastic."

- "As a city councilman, I asked the group to research several cities in the U.S. similar to ours, and perform a comparative economic analysis. They did an outstanding job on this assignment." [This client was so impressed with the team's work he sent an e-mail to the Chancellor of IUK commending them for their performance.]

- "The group delivered excellent work, and a great presentation. Their report provided useful advice we can use and implement. The applications they delivered will help us with accounting and help us determine a better strategy for inventory management. I was impressed with the effort and work of this group. We will definitely be open to working with another group of MBA students in the future."

- "We were very impressed with the professional manner in which the team performed its tasks and the excellent deliverables they provided at the end of the project. We plan to make use of your services again in the near future; and we will recommend our business associates do the same."

- "Fabulous job on the report and presentation! It was thought-provoking and will be very

5 A major weakness of Field-Based Consulting (FBC) is "it requires a significant amount of time on the part of the instructor to seek out clients, supervise students, coordinate multiple sections, and teach other assigned courses" (Cook & Belliveau, 2006, p. 129).

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helpful as we go into our planning sessions for the next year. This experience exceeded our expectations."

- "We appreciated the hard work and effort the team put forth as well as the fresh perspective and insights they provided. The most significant value was the detailed and comprehensive financial analysis the team provided associated with the multi-year view of using existing staffing methods versus a program where we would provide training to lesser experienced employees."

- "Thanks to the work of these MBA students, we now have a better understanding of what our customers want and how they want it delivered."

- "While we anticipated most of the group's recommendations, there were a few suggestions we had not expected. This in itself made the whole venture worthwhile."

- "After examining our competitors' advertising, the team developed new materials for us. These look great! We are confident they will help increase our sales."

2.4. MBA students' responses to consultative course

While perhaps not as critical as firms' evaluations of the business advisory course, the feedback from MBA students was nevertheless valuable, especially in terms of possible changes that needed to be made. Although most responses from business graduates were very positive, some were somewhat less positive. Here are several representative "positive" comments from members of different MBA consulting teams:

- "I have considerable appreciation for all that the C599 course seeks to achieve. Allowing students the opportunity to tackle business problems in the 'real world,' and apply the knowledge they've attained in the graduate program toward finding and implementing solutions, is invaluable experience. Overall, the fundamental concept of the C599 course makes it a fitting capstone to the MBA program."

- "Project gave me experience, applicability to future jobs, networking, client interaction, speaking in front of professionals, and confidence building."

- "In developing a study for a proposed new in-house consultant program for this software company, we received valuable training in real-world business project management as well as applied financial and economic analyses. The biggest benefit was learning business project management techniques and skills."

- "Offers an opportunity to learn and experience firsthand all the various functions and undertakings necessary to successfully operate and manage a business in today's challenging environment."

- "Learned about the challenge of working in peer teams, learning from others, motivating others, value of effective team work, and meeting expectations of clients."

- "Best aspect of the experience was ability to be creative, part of building a new strategy, writing a business plan, giving clients suggestions and recommendations, and the ability to get our clients to think outside the box."

- "Liked the attempt to make this an experience where all factors of the MBA program could be applied in a real-life project."

- "Best aspects of the consulting experience include real-world and experience with real-world problems."

- "The course allows students the chance to expand their business network by establishing important connections with local business leaders they assist as well as with the peers that they collaborate with." [This was an additional benefit of C599 we had not anticipated.]

- "I liked the actual client experience, which felt like a real business project – not a traditional course."

- "Consulting experience required me to incorporate and apply everything I had previously learned in my courses."

- "I learned a lot about the process. Also, I learned a lot about myself and my abilities."

Even those few MBA students whose comments on C599 were slightly less positive provided useful suggestions for improving the business consultative experience. [NOTE: Comments ending in an asterisk (*) have been subsequently addressed to the satisfaction of our graduate students.] Some representative "constructive" comments include:

- "Offer more guidance in the beginning stages."*

- "Meet as a group with instructor to get a handle on ideas to make the project happen."*

- "Provide students information about the company in advance."*

- "Allow MBAs to select their own teams."

- "Choose and select companies where students could benefit and gain knowledge."

- "Needed more direction and assistance throughout project from the instructor."*

- "Had too many meetings during the day. This is a night MBA program and it counts against me at work to take time during the day to attend meetings."*

- "Some team members contributed much less than others."

- "Course should be more structured."*

- "Required too much time."

2.5. Problems encountered with C599 and modifications

With C599 being a new course, we experienced myriad things to address (e.g., creation of course title and description), which were successfully accomplished. In addition, there were several minor and some not so minor problems that arose. But, after the inaugural year, most of these either disappeared or dramatically decreased in severity. On the other hand, the following six problems that arose initially continue to plague us:

1) firms waiting too long to contact us about their consulting needs;

2) companies wanting consulting projects conducted during the academic year;

3) firms wanting their projects completed earlier than the originally agreed upon date;

4) number of requested consulting projects exceeding the number of available C599 students;

5) companies' consulting needs not aligning with backgrounds of available MBA students; and

6) firms expanding (or changing) the scope of their consulting project.

2.6. Firms waiting too long to contact us

Companies oftentimes waited until after a semester had commenced to contact us concerning their consulting needs. Unfortunately, by this time, all of our available C599 students had already been assigned to other firms. Most of these companies understood the situation and contacted us much sooner the next time they needed a consulting project completed. On the other hand, some of these "last-minute" firms were unwilling to accept our explanation; they never contacted us again.

2.7. Companies wanting projects conducted during academic year

For reasons mentioned in an earlier footnote, the optimal time for us when we originally offered the business consultative course was during the summer. But, this is also when most employees go on vacations, and some firms close for several weeks to take inventory. As a result, the majority of companies who desired consulting projects wanted these conducted during the academic

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year. Unfortunately, between Summer 2013 and Fall 2014, we were unable to oblige them. However, with the arrival of a new Dean in Summer 2014 and his willingness to handle C599 as his annual course load, we were able to meet the consulting needs of companies year-around. This issue, therefore, is not nearly as problematic as it once was.

2.8. Firms wanting projects completed earlier than planned

Companies sometimes wanted their projects completed earlier than the originally agreed upon date. If the consulting team was informed early enough and the new deadline was only two weeks sooner in a four-month project, then there was likely no problem. But, if the firm waited until a month before the deadline to inform C599 students they had two weeks to complete the project, this caused considerable consternation among group members. The latter is exactly what happened to one MBA team. When the leader inquired as to the reason for the deadline change, the client replied: "I'm going on vacation in two weeks. I need your report before I leave. Things like this happen in the real world. So get used to it!" Fortunately, one group member had two weeks of vacation coming that he could take anytime, another was between jobs, and this was the last course for the remaining individual. By putting in long hours for two weeks, the consulting team was able to meet the company's new deadline.

2.9. Demand for consulting projects exceeding supply of consultants

Initially, we had significantly more requests from firms for consulting projects than we had MBA students available. This was an especially acute problem during the academic year. As a result, several firms ceased contacting us. But, with the arrival of a new Dean in Summer 2014, who volunteered to handle C599 as his required yearly course load, we were able to meet the consulting needs of many more companies than we originally had. While this problem is not nearly as severe as it once was, we are still at the mercy of the forces of supply (i.e., number of new graduate business students who enroll each year in our program) and demand (i.e., number of firms who desire consulting projects completed during a specific semester).

2.10. Companies' needs not aligning with available consultants' backgrounds

Depending upon firms' consulting needs in a semester, we sometimes lacked an adequate number of qualified MBAs to field a team with the same academic background for each client. When this occurred, we created groups where at least the leader possessed the necessary background for the company's project. This placed an additional burden upon the leader. It also increased the likelihood of the team's performance not meeting the client's expectations, which could jeopardize the future of the consultative experience. In those cases, where the firm desired a group of graduate business students with the same academic training, we were sometimes able to convince the prospective client to postpone its project until the subsequent semester when we were likely to have more MBA students available with the desired background. Unfortunately, some were not willing to wait. In spite of having more graduate business students available each semester and more interested companies as well as being able to offer C599 every semester, this problem still haunts us, especially during the summer.

2.11. Firms expanding (or changing) scope of project

Even with a "Memorandum of Understanding" (MOU) signed by the client, some companies tried to expand (or change) the scope of their project partway through the venture. If the requested change was "minor" in nature (e.g., create two additional spreadsheets) and would not delay the completion of the undertaking, then this was not a problem. On the other hand, if the firm's change was "major" (e.g., expand the number of distributors personally interviewed from 20 to 50), then this would significantly increase the workload of the MBA consulting team, thereby jeopardizing completion of the project by the original mutually agreed upon date. When we reminded the contracting company of the contents of the MOU, which they had signed, almost all retracted their request. (Interestingly, many of these companies approached us in subsequent years and either asked for an expansion of their original venture or requested us to complete a new one.) However,

some firms were displeased we did not expand (or change) the scope of their project; they never contacted us again.

2.12. Additional modifications to C599 by Dean

Based upon feedback from client companies and MBA students, the Dean made these additional modifications to C599:

- More "informal" class meetings up front with MBA students. Instead of having only two meetings up front with students as he originally intended – one to provide an overview, and a second to select teams and assign clients, the Dean added a third meeting up front, which focused on the keys to successful team-based consulting.

- Two "formal" class meetings with MBA team members were added. Around mid-semester, the Dean meets with group members to discuss some of the challenges they are experiencing (e.g., clients not responding in a timely fashion), and he helps them to identify ways to overcome these. Then, two weeks before the presentation to the client, the Dean meets with team members to provide guidance in terms of preparing the final report, preparation of the presentation, and nature of final meeting with the firm.

- Several relatively short "informal" meetings with MBA group members were added. In addition to the above-mentioned meetings, the Dean meets informally with team members several times during the semester to inquire about the status of their project.

- Stressed the need to continually keep clients informed concerning the status of their projects. A few firms informed the Dean "they anticipated more frequent direct interaction between the students and client." The Dean said "This helped me clarify a bit more my recommendations to the clients for subsequent semesters but also inform the future student teams regarding keeping the client more in the loop and engaged, without being constantly under foot."

2.13. Suggestions for launching MBA consultative course

The original intent of C599 was to provide our MBA students with a real-world business consultative experience near the end of their program. We wanted this course to be significantly different from other MBA classes, especially the traditional capstone course. Overall, and in general, we feel we accomplished this purpose. This does not mean, however, we did not encounter problems – minor and major – along the way. We certainly did (and still do); but, we resolved most of these. As a result, we feel C599 is much improved and better than it was initially. Over time, we believe our business consultative experience will become even better as we confront and address future problems, difficulties, and issues as well as incorporate suggestions from client companies and our MBA teams.

Having weathered the development, implementation, and modification of a realistic consultative course for graduate business students near the end of their program, we wish to provide several general recommendations and a multitude of specific suggestions for the benefit of any small-sized MBA program, like ours, who is considering offering a C599-type course. Four overriding general recommendations are:

1) do not provide a lot of guidance and assistance to consulting teams;

2) do not develop a highly structured consulting course;

3) do not intervene in internal consulting group-oriented problems; and

4) avoid getting involved in consulting team-client company issues, unless the university's image may be adversely affected.

Otherwise, C599 will become like every other MBA class, which defeats the original purpose of this course.

In addition to these general recommendations, we offer the following specific suggestions for providing a realistic consultative experience for MBAs near the end of their program:

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- Assign the business consultative experience to one faculty member. This will bring more consistency, stability, and continuity to the course than if several instructors shared responsibilities.

- Offer C599 each semester of the year, including summer. In this way, companies can be assured their consulting projects will be completed when they desire.

- Create consulting groups with either two or three MBA students – no more and no less. We have found this to be the optimal team size for the C599 experience. A one-person group in actuality is either an independent study or internship. If the team exceeds three members, there is likely to be at least one "slacker".

- Develop consulting teams that reflect the needs of clients. Do not permit students to select their own C599 groups, as this may prove detrimental to firms.

- Select the leader of each C599 team. This individual must be capable of leading members of the consulting group and motivating them to perform. In addition, this person must be able to determine the details (or stages) of the project and complete each according to plan while maintaining an overall perspective. Finally, this individual must possess excellent communication skills – both written and spoken – as well as interpersonal skills.

- During the first meeting with MBA students, provide an overview of the business consultative experience and discuss the keys of successful team-based consulting.

- Require each student to sign a confidentiality agreement indicating he/she will not disclose any information provided by the firm to anyone without first obtaining the company's written consent. This also applies to the consulting project, results, and final report. [Give the client copies of these signed confidentiality agreements, which will provide them some measure of assurance that their information and results of the project will not be disclosed to anyone other than company officials without prior authorization.]

- Stress to consulting group members the importance of:

  – wearing appropriate business attire at each face-to-face meeting with the client; and

  – being professional in speech, body language, manners, etc. each time they interact with company personnel.

- Prior to the first meeting with the firm, each member of the C599 team should provide the company with an up-to-date copy of his/her resume. In this way, the client will have an opportunity to review the employment history, educational background, etc. of each consulting group member before the initial meeting.

- The School of Business should have business cards prepared for each team member before their inaugural meeting with the firm. This will permit C599 students to distribute business cards to company officials at their first meeting.

- The faculty member should initially meet with members of the client firm (without the consulting team being present) in order to determine exactly what the company wants done, when, etc.

- Accompany the consulting group to their initial meeting with the client, introduce them to company personnel, and listen to firm officials as they explain the purpose, nature, etc. of their project to the MBAs.

- After the preliminary meeting with the client, meet with team members and discuss what company representatives said they want done in order to ensure the group completely understands what the firm desires in terms of a project.

- After this initial meeting, require the consulting team to prepare a "Memorandum of Understanding" (MOU) and project proposal, which details:

  - nature and purpose of the project;
  - project stages/phases;
  - "deliverables" provided by the C599 group to the client;
  - role of the client; and
  - project timetable.

- Review consulting team's MOU and project proposal to ensure it satisfies the client's needs and fulfills the requirements of C599. If it does not, provide the group with suggestions for improvement. Later, review revised MOU and project proposal to be sure it is appropriate and complete. If it is, have each team member sign the MOU and project proposal, forward a copy to the client for their signature, and ask them to return a copy to the C599 team.
- Ask each MBA student to maintain a log of the number of hours spent on the client's consulting project.
- Stress to consulting team members the importance of keeping the client informed on a regular basis concerning the status of the project.
- Leave the information-gathering process regarding the firm, industry, etc. to the MBA students. Do not provide them this information, as it defeats the intent of C599.
- Throughout the semester, meet periodically with members of each group to inquire about the status of their project.
- About mid-semester, meet with all C599 teams as a group to discuss some of the challenges they are experiencing, and help them identify ways to overcome these.
- Periodically, contact the liaison individual at the client company to inquire about the consulting group's performance to date. If the firm has any concerns, meet with team members to discuss these, and develop feasible solutions.
- Near the end of the semester, meet with all C599 groups to provide guidance in terms of preparing the final report, preparation of the presentation, and nature of final meeting with the client.
- Review consulting team's final report and presentation slides to ensure these satisfy the company's needs. If not, provide the group with suggestions for improvement. Later, review the revised report and slides to be sure these meet the client's requirements.
- Have each C599 team give a "dress rehearsal" presentation before members of other consulting groups, MBA students, Dean, MBA Director, and School of Business faculty, which is followed by a "Question-and-Answer" period as well as a time for evaluation and suggestions for improving the presentation.
- Following the "dress rehearsal" presentation, meet with team members to review suggestions made by attendees as well as determine what revisions – if any – are necessary in their final report and presentation.
- The School of Business should prepare professionally bound copies of each group's final report, which will be presented to firm personnel attending the presentation.
- Have members of each C599 team present the results of their consulting project to officials of the client company.
- Following the presentation and distribution of copies of the final report to firm representatives, each member of the consulting group should evaluate:
  - every other member in terms of quality of contribution, etc.; and
  - C599 in terms of several other related variables (e.g., learning experience).
- After company personnel have had an opportunity to read the team's report, ask them to evaluate the performance of the consulting group on various criteria (e.g., critical thinking, communication, etc.).

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- Develop and forward a formal survey to the client in order to determine how well the consulting team performed in each stage/phase of the project, and ask for suggestions to improve this experience.

- Develop and forward a formal survey to each member of the consulting team in order to determine how well they think they performed in each stage/phase of the project, and ask for suggestions to improve this experience.

- Conduct "face-to-face" exit interviews with the client and each member of the consulting team in terms of their expectations for the project, quality of "deliverables", suggestions for improvement, etc.

CONCLUSION

After completing several academic terms of a full course load, most major universities require their MBA students to work full-time on focused-based consulting (FBC) projects for large-sized companies. Because of the size and stature of these major universities, they have ready access to large-sized corporations. Such exposure and consulting project experience facilitates the transition of these universities' MBAs into the top echelon of the business world.

From its beginning in 1992, Indiana University Kokomo's (IUK) MBA program included a capstone course (J560), wherein groups of graduate students developed business plans for small-sized area firms. However, these students had to also complete several Harvard Business School cases and take two examinations. In addition, all of IUK's MBA students had full-time jobs. Needless to say, the quality and completeness of these companies' business plans suffered to some extent. Due to low enrollment, J560 was offered only in the fall. Most local companies needed assistance during other times of the year.

In 2012, two faculty members of IUK's School of Business attended an AACSB-sponsored seminar on "Redesigning the MBA." Faculty from several major universities discussed new trends in MBA curriculum worthy of consideration by small-sized programs. After hearing comments from the two IUK attendees on the seminar topic, the School of Business faculty decided to develop and launch a stand-alone FBC course (C599), which would provide its MBA students with a real-world business consultative experience near the end of their program. Business faculty wanted this course to be significantly different from other MBA classes, especially the traditional, structured capstone course (J560). Despite initial "trials and tribulations", which were previously discussed, C599 is thriving and growing. IUK's MBA students feel this course has positively influenced their business careers. In addition, C599 has had a significant impact upon the economic development of firms in northcentral Indiana. Any small-sized university thinking about creating and offering a stand-alone FBC course should avail itself of the list of suggestions provided near the end of this paper.

The following quote from the book entitled "Rethinking the MBA" by Datar et al. (2010) aptly summarizes and concludes this paper:

[Field-based consulting projects] … give students firsthand knowledge of the difficulty of introducing initiatives, solving persistent problems, and getting groups of people to move in new directions. They are certain to teach students a great deal about the nuts and bolts of management, the levers of organizational action, and common barriers to change (p. 93).[6]

6 According to Sroufe and Ramos (2011), "Prospective employers expect MBA graduates to bring more than technical skills. Recruiters are looking for proven performance in managing decision-making processes and structuring analyses. They also seek ability to apply business basics from all disciplines to any job, function or facility, which cannot be learned when functional courses are taught in isolation. … [MBA students] who experience active learning in … field projects develop a broad range of skill sets that employers find valuable" (p. 364).

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