Managing Student Consulting Teams in Graduate Business School Programs

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Most graduate business schools offer some opportunity for students to participate in teams working on projects either for businesses or non-profit organizations (student consulting projects). In principle, the organization and structure of the student consulting program should be congruent with its educational objectives, however this linkage is rarely explicit and may not exist at all. The individual process steps involved in managing student consulting programs have their own best practices that relate to the steps themselves and are largely independent of program objectives and structure. Very little literature exists on any aspects of student consulting programs and there are very few metrics for determining success so there has not been any real potential to share experiences and create improved programs.

The purpose of this paper is to characterize the types of student consulting team programs and then to lay out the process steps in managing those teams, highlighting areas where best practices are emerging. At the conclusion it poses questions for additional research to explore the link between educational objectives and program structure as well as to identify and clarify best practices.

Structure of Student Consulting Team Programs

Since business schools are rarely explicit about the objectives they have for student consulting team programs, it is necessary to infer the objectives from the program's structure. While this is the inverse of the logical approach, it does provide some insight into the various possible objectives. At one extreme, some business schools require participation in a team as a part of the core curriculum often referred to as "capstones". At the other extreme, some schools have ad hoc programs where students can undertake consulting assignments if they manage the process themselves. In between, many offer an elective course and some simply have a club structure where students can volunteer for projects, usually for local non-profits.

As business schools with the capstone, required course model attempt to demonstrate, it is realistic to use student consulting projects as a means to integrate the various functional courses, provide a real world practical experience and build team skills. The objectives of the other programs appear to be quite variable. Some may merely be attempting to accommodate highly motivated students who have their own ideas and projects with linkage to the academic program only if there is a motivated faculty supervisor. Other programs incorporate student consulting into a specific course such as management consulting, marketing or team organization or they provide clubs with social service orientations. Better statements of intent will help drive more effective structure, help balance resources with objectives and encourage closer integration of consulting programs with educational objectives.

A second, often unstated, set of program objectives is the balance between integration of functional coursework and preparation for job searches. Programs focused on integrating curriculum elements tend to push the student consulting process into the final, usually spring, semester of the students' coursework (a time when classroom fatigue may also be setting in). Programs looking to assist students switch careers tend to occur in the fall of the second year in two year degree programs. This gives the students the opportunity for exposure and contacts in a field prior to the recruiting season.

As a final, more operational element of program structure, most experience indicates that it is extremely difficult to have student consulting teams comprised of part-time graduate students, mostly for logistical reasons. The project sponsors operate during normal business hours, usually making it difficult for part-time students to communicate with the project sponsor. In addition, part-time students often have a hard time scheduling their own team meetings. These logistical issues can be overcome, but they make the process more cumbersome for both the student teams themselves and for the faculty supervisors.

Process Steps in Managing Student Consulting Teams

All student consulting programs, no matter what the objectives, when they are offered, or what types of students participate have four core process steps for managing the student consulting teams and the total process:

1. Recruiting and qualifying projects
2. Forming student teams and matching them to the projects
3. Supervising the teams over the course of the projects
4. Monitoring and grading the projects

In the absence of clear measures of success, it is difficult to "prove" any specific approach as a best practice. Given that caveat, there seems to be a consensus on how to treat the project recruitment/qualifying and the team supervision processes. The approach to forming teams and matching them with projects has some clarity in the required capstone programs and remains something of a conundrum in other programs. There appear to be a wide range of practices for monitoring and grading projects, with no obvious best practices yet.

Recruiting and Qualifying Projects

The major uncertainty in recruiting and qualifying projects revolves around the number of projects required. The clear best practice is to recruit (or receive applications from) approximately the same number of project sponsors as student teams. Rejecting applicants is uncomfortable and creates ill will, even with frequent caveats in the application process that not all sponsors will get teams. Capstone programs have a reasonable sense of the number of teams and this makes estimating the required number of projects simpler. Any degree of pre-registration also helps in this approach. Spring consulting programs may have an advantage here because it is often harder to sense real enrollment preferences for a Fall term until nearly the beginning of that term.

The need to qualify projects is a clear area of best practices. A review of the projects submitted to a business school from prospective sponsors and personal experience indicates that almost all projects require some clarification of scope even before they are ready to present to students. The amount and type of work that a team comprised of graduate management students can do in a semester for the equivalent of one course is relatively small and the actual capabilities of the students are limited. Student teams are generally capable of research and data analysis projects and they are much less suited for projects requiring maturity and judgment. Similarly, projects that require extensive on-site presence are usually difficult to schedule. In addition to scope, there are other screening issues that have emerged as important such as the commitment level of the sponsor and the sponsor's availability for continuing communication (usually entailing a local project). Failure to qualify projects before they are made available to student teams will pre-ordain that some teams will be frustrated with their projects.

Forming Student Teams and Matching Them to Projects

Forming student teams and matching them with projects remains an area of some frustration for many programs. Required capstone programs can take a highly proactive approach with the faculty assigning teams and projects. All other programs entail some voluntary aspect of team formation and matching with projects, usually done over a very few days or at most two weeks given the deadlines in course selection schedules. At best this is a messy process trying to accomplish two objectives at once (team formation and project selection). Project-oriented approaches (many projects are available and teams coalesce around the project) lead to teams where the students may not know each other and have no internal cohesion. More ad hoc approaches often have teams self-form and then go in search of a project and/or a faculty sponsor. Neither of these methods works very well and this area needs further thought, experience and experimentation.

The area of team formation that does seem to have a best practice is team size, with teams of 3-4 working best. Larger teams create greater potential for internal team conflict, seem to encourage some members to slack off and create greater logistical challenges. Teams of two members do not have the critical mass to share ideas or get work done. The disadvantage of 3-4 person teams is that the smaller the team, the greater number for a given level of enrollment. This puts pressure on the project recruiting and the supervisory processes so that a student consulting team course can require more faculty hours per student than a more traditional classroom-based course.

Supervising Teams over the Course of the Projects

Team supervision over the course of a project has a core of best practice – continuing supervision is beneficial on a 2-3 week time frame. This level of supervision allows teams time to work while keeping pressure on to move the project forward and discourages attempts to do all of the work at the end. Many programs have also found that supervisors with real consulting project management experience are useful to provide guidance on how to manage what is, in fact, a consulting process. Research-oriented academics often have different perspectives and interests so that project supervision is outside of their core skills and experiences.

Some programs include a classroom component to supplement the actual project work. Experience shows that this needs to be quite limited or the time available for the project becomes highly constrained. Each individual student can devote approximately 70-80 hours to the project over the course of a 10-12 week semester. Even a few classes with associated preparation can cut heavily into this time.

Monitoring and Grading the Projects

Monitoring projects, like all monitoring activities, is only an issue if something is going wrong and needs to be corrected. Periodic review sessions can usually show whether the team is doing sufficient work and is in reasonable touch with the project sponsor. Ferreting out issues of team dynamics is more problematic since team members have a tendency to cover for each other until frustration sets in. Once this happens, teams of young inexperienced members have few skills and resources to overcome internal team issues (these teams are also inherently self-managed, the most difficult approach to team management). Suggestions and experiences on how to recognize and deal with team issues would be very valuable.

There are a wide variety of practices for grading projects including both individual and group grades, internal team surveys, sponsor surveys, presentations to various forms of review committees, etc. All of these methods have significant problems and sharing of experiences here may be useful. For example, project sponsors are focused on their own concerns not on the team's educational objectives, presentations before review committees become huge logistical and time problems for anything more than a small number of teams. Continuing supervision and final review seem to give the best insight into how well a team has done. Surveying the team on its own dynamics is also used to determine if there are team members who did not contribute fairly to the effort.

Areas for Sharing of Experiences

There are a wide range of issues that would benefit from additional clarification and sharing of experiences:

- Explicit statements of objectives and the intended linkage with program structure
- Experience with the balance between curriculum integration and career preparation
- Positive experiences in integrating part-time students into student consulting teams
- Best practices on each of the process management elements, especially:
    - Forming student teams and matching them to projects, especially in programs with uncertain numbers of students
    - Benefits versus costs of classroom sessions augmenting the team experience
    - Identifying problems in the teams themselves and guiding the teams to more constructive working relationships
    - Final approaches to evaluation and the resource implications of team presentations to multiple faculty members