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# A Strategic Management Learning Laboratory: Integrating the College Classroom and the College Human Resource Management Environment

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This capstone course extended the classroom to include practitioner-focused research projects and presentations to senior-level campus management. The course served as a student learning laboratory for experiencing working-world settings, problems, and expectations, using the controlled environment of a college human resource management office, working with the Director of Human Resource Management. Learning outcomes included 1) effectively using multiple business communication skills, 2) applying quantitative and qualitative reasoning for problem solving to integrate, synthesize and apply complex information for addressing practical problems; 3) experience in adapting to a real-life, changing environment, and 4) making management decisions that reflected the dynamic interrelationships of the major functions of business to achieve the mission of the organization. Finally, students reported a heightened sense of task identity, personal commitment to their college and their education, and a legacy of contribution for their role in helping shape human resource management policies for college governance.

**Key Words:** Pedagogy, Learning laboratory, Human resource management, Experiential learning

## Introduction

In comparison to traditional strategic management courses that often rely on textbook cases discussed in classroom settings, an alternative pedagogy created an experiential learning laboratory by developing work setting projects that took the students outside the classroom and into an organizational work setting, the students' own college. The strategic management teaching focus was developed by using four real-time human resource management projects through the college Human Resource Management (HRM) department. The hiring of a new Director of HRM presented an opportunity to have students serve as on-campus, internal strategic management consultants to analyze HRM projects addressing compensation, orientation, time-off, and workforce planning. The students' familiarity with campus issues, combined with their direct access to executive-level governance, created an on-campus, experiential learning laboratory with access and input to directly affect strategic HRM policy decisions and actions of their own campus. The students were senior class business majors and nearly all had no prior HRM coursework or experience, so the emphasis was on strategic assessment, with the HRM context more background than foreground. These projects were successful for the students, who indicated their increased commitment to their college, their incipient profession, and to their own capabilities and interests. The projects were successful for the instructor in that the students realized the desired

learning outcomes, as well as helped create new faculty-administration connections across campus. Furthermore, the projects were successful for the HRM Director, who gained content, context, and analysis on four significant HRM problem areas that confronted him on his arrival on campus. The Director presented the students' recommendations to the President's Cabinet, where these recommendations received full consideration by the Cabinet and provided support for related initiatives undertaken by HRM. The students' direct involvement with the college's executive governance provided an unusual learning opportunity for these students to directly affect policy decisions and actions on their campus. The students also internalized these projects as a form of their legacy for their years on campus.

This discussion will begin with an overview of a more traditional strategic management course before addressing the benefits of incorporating an experiential alternative. Specific concerns and aspects of the current strategic management course will consider the timing and opportunities presented to the students, and similarly to the HRM Director, in creating the learning laboratory for this strategic management course. The course format and assignments are presented, as are the variety of learning and organizational outcomes experienced by the students, the HRM Director, and the instructor.

### **Traditional Strategic Management Course**

The traditional capstone strategic management course seeks to teach students to develop interdisciplinary decision making frameworks. This learning objective intends that students will integrate their respective content areas (e.g., accounting, management, marketing, operations, etc.), learned independently during their enrollment in the business school curriculum, into situational, yet holistic, decisions that consider the actions and implications of these actions across the organization.

The traditional course addresses this learning objective by focusing on problem identification, problem research and analysis, and problem recommendations leading to problem resolution. These problems usually involve choosing appropriate goals as well as developing interdisciplinary decision making frameworks for developing, organizing and managing the critical resources necessary to achieve these goals, all in the context of an uncertain, imperfect, competitive and changing world. Textbooks generally include chapters that categorize strategic management inputs, strategic analysis, competitive advantage, globalization, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, strategic change, and strategy evaluation (David, 2005; Dess, Lumpkin, & Taylor, 2005; Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson, 2005; Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn, & Ghoshal, 2003; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; Wheelan & Hunger, 2004). Thus, these texts provide a teaching framework to help students identify the analytic framework to assess organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis; e.g., Dess et al., 2005; Nickels, McHugh, & McHugh, 2005) related to the internal and external environments of the organization. This traditional course then communicates strategic frameworks, strategic alternatives, and strategic actions as a model to accomplish organizational goals and strategic visions.

The traditional method of teaching this course has been through case analyses, generally using business-related cases culled from a variety of business texts (e.g., David, 2005; Hitt et al., 2005; Mintzberg et al., 2005; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; Wheelen & Hunger, 2004), and on-line

sources (e.g., Harvard Business School cases—[www.hbsp.harvard.edu](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu); Hartwick Classic Leadership cases—[www.hartwick.edu](http://www.hartwick.edu); Richard Ivey School of Business—[www1.ivey.ca/cases](http://www1.ivey.ca/cases)). These cases are generally derived from recent, working-world business entities and activities, and present a large variety of for-profit companies (e.g., Wal-Mart—Wheelan & Hunger, 2004) and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., American Red Cross—David, 2005), service industry (eBay—Thompson & Strickland, 2003) and manufacturing industry (Boeing—David, 2005), and teaching focus (e.g., Ethics and social responsibility—Thompson & Strickland, 2003).

### **“Hands On” Experiential Learning**

While these applied, working world cases can be instructive in their content, they remain merely two-dimensional. As textbook cases, they lack the interactive perspectives available to students from their active immersion and participation in organizational culture, perspectives that stem from experience that can foster greater depth of learning and understanding. Rather than addressing contrived noise provided by authors in textbook cases, the student’s experiential involvement exposes them to the uncertain, imperfect, competitive, and changing world in which their organizations exist and in which the students will shortly find themselves employed. A second limitation of these two-dimensional cases is that they are taught in the classroom. This textbook focus contributes to business curricula criticism of “producing graduates long on technical know-how, but short on soft skills, such as communication, leadership, decision making, negotiation and conflict resolution, creativity, and so on” (Torres-Coronas, Arias-Olivia, & Souto-Romero, 2005).

In contrast to classroom learning, students can also develop learning and understanding in the work setting itself. An active, experiential learning setting allows students to develop academically by learning to think and reflect critically about their experiences in order to make connections to their class work. This experiential method offers opportunities to students to learn within, not simply about, real work environments, which can meet the recognized need of business students to gain additional breadth and engagement (Porter and McKibben, 1988). The external learning experience is the “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.38) by incorporating Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model’s four components related to learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Students participate directly in addressing problems and projects in the work setting, thereby providing their concrete experience. They then can reflect on these activities and interactions, considering the outcomes and the perspectives both observed and felt directly. These reflections establish a new heuristic framework for students to incorporate the theoretical concepts learned in the classroom, and then to review and accept or revise their behaviors and responses to effect subsequent, resultant outcomes.

Additional research indicated these “non-traditional educational experiences connect students’ cognitive learning inside the classroom with their affective learning in the lab, on the job, or at the [work] site. The [course] instructors and [work site] mentors... begin to shape or enhance young adults’ sense of professionalism in their fields well before they leave the campus” (Stefes, 2004, p. 46). Students thus benefit from on-site supervision and training, which is then reinforced through their subsequent reflections and discussions relating their on-site experiences

back to the academic setting (Gray, Ondaattje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Peters, McHugh, & Sendall, 2006; Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000).

Unlike formal, classroom learning, this experiential, learning laboratory environment promotes opportunities for “informal learning” (Hillbrand & Kehrhahn, 2003). Informal learning develops because management knowledge “is acquired, not from books, lectures, or formal training sessions, but from informal learning—direct... experience, trial and error learning, observation of senior [management], traditional supervision, peer supervision, and critical reflection” (Hillbrand & Kehrhahn, 2003). Thus, informal, experiential, soft skill learning offers an alternative learning mode that both reinforces and expands the traditional, formal, technical learning of the classroom.

Experiential projects are found in many management curricula, although most projects have a “predominantly private sector focus” (Zlotkowski, 2000, p. VI). Alternatively, these same management concepts and skills can be applied as service learning projects in the local community, the non-profit sector, and specifically, in the students’ own college. “Service learning combines traditional classroom and laboratory experiences” (Bonar, Buchanan, Fisher, & Wechsler, 1996, p. 15) for students to “reflect on the service activity in such a way [as] to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle and Hatcher (1995, p. 112). Moreover, service learning projects have been “reconnecting higher education... with the American tradition of education for service” (Zlotkowski, 2000, p. V), which includes focusing on “the muck and mire of real-life decision making processes [and] the quagmire of dealing with the political, ethical, and social *implications* of stakeholders affected by these decisions” (Waddock & Post, 2000, p. 51).

More formal advocacy came from Charles Wankel, the 2000 Chair of the Management Education and Development (MED) Division of the Academy of Management, who endorsed “this management service learning...to enhance student learning by joining management theory with experience, and management analysis with action. Service learning prepares business students to see new relevance to their coursework” (Wankel, 2000, p. IX). Samuelson (2000) stated that “service-learning requires students to apply business analysis to real problems in a live setting – something rarely achieved with standard case materials” (p. 6), and further, “One of the distinct advantages of service-learning and programs that support service activity is their ability to infuse the social context of business throughout the business education experience, and with greater immediacy than is possible through traditional coursework...” (p. 17). This model “provides a powerful framework... to help a student explain and describe, both cognitively and affectively, his[her] lived experience working in a soup kitchen versus reading about a soup kitchen in class” (Steffes, 2004, p. 46).

Researchers have recommended specifically incorporating service learning as an integral element of a course (Howard, 1998; Weigert, 1998; Eyler and Giles, 1999), which appeared to offer better student outcomes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Rama et al. (2000) categorized these outcomes as Intellectual Outcomes, defined as “cognitive competencies, including knowledge of textbook content, relationship of [business] knowledge to the business world, and critical thinking skills” (p. 660), and Personal Outcomes, defined as “personal demeanor, leadership, and communication [and] values-related competencies, and ... including honesty and ethical conduct,

ability to analyze the impact of potential actions, and ability to promote constructive change” (pp.672-673):

*“Service experiences can give students a context within which to place course content, which increases the quantity and depth of their understanding. In particular, the complexity of real-world projects can help students become more open to uncertainty, recognize greater complexity in the problems they analyze, think strategically, and use learned material in new ways... [D]uring S-L experiences students may encounter people from diverse backgrounds who hold different points of view. Interfacing with such people can challenge students to reconsider or reaffirm their own perspectives, increase their understanding of other viewpoints, and contemplate a wider range of possibilities.” (p. 660)*

Prior research has demonstrated that experiential projects helped students improve their higher order thinking skills, leading to greater personal development, insights, and understanding; better communication; increased social and interpersonal development skills; awareness of other perspectives; stronger analytical, problem solving, and decision making skills; and improved linking of formal course material to outside work settings (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Hamner, 2002; Steffes, 2004). Additional outcomes research has supported service learning as contributing to improvements in motivation and purpose, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, ethical and spiritual development, moral sensitivity and reasoning abilities professionalism (Bryant & Hunton, 2000; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Jacoby, 1996; Kezar & Rhodes, 2001; Madsen, 2004, Peters et al., 2006). Furthermore, these student opportunities can lead to increased self-efficacy, the confidence “in their own ability to act and make a difference, which in turn can increase their leadership skills (e.g., willingness to be socially proactive, to believe they can influence change, to exercise effort to achieve change, and to anticipate the consequences of their actions)” (Rama et al., 2000, p. 673). These experiential outcomes both augment and incorporate classroom theory and learning for students to effectively transfer their broad preparation to their next employment work setting as incoming employees.

These projects have varied in management settings (Chandler, 2000; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996; Peters et al., 2006; Rama et al., 2000), with faculty, college administrators, and community and corporate officials working collaboratively with students to conduct the service learning projects (Clark, 2000, p. 143; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2000, p. 62). Recognizing the valued learning outcomes of service learning experiential projects, Clark (2000) and Peters et al. (2006) have previously conducted human resource management projects with a variety of organizations, including their college human resource management offices. The current study extended the use of students as internal consultants (Clark, 2000; Davis & Michel, 2000; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2000) by working directly with senior human resource management at their own college. Specific human resource management topics were chosen jointly by the course instructor and the Director of Human Resource Management. These projects were chosen to provide direction for developing and implementing changes in HRM policy on campus. Through the HRM Director, the students conducting these projects would have direct input and access to the college governance structure. Such integral and direct access, experience, and management impact for students with the executive governance on their own campus was an application of service learning that benefited the students, faculty, and administration.

## **Experiential Learning—An On-Campus Learning Laboratory**

Recognizing that most of a college senior's 120-128 credit hours are spent inside the classroom, and further recognizing that senior business majors will very shortly be employees immersed in the dynamics of organizational culture, working with the types of real-world issues they could shortly face as employees would provide the students with an important transition experience. This learning environment included the classroom, but was also outside the classroom—indeed, it could be argued that the last thing a college senior needs is three more hours a week inside a classroom.

To add this experiential element as an alternative to relying on classroom and textbook teaching, students could directly experience interpersonal, analytical, and soft skills learning opportunities in a protected organizational culture and work setting. Therefore, undergraduate business-major seniors taking a capstone strategic management course at a northeastern college were involved in a formative learning laboratory—their college human resource management office. With a new Director of Human Resource Management succeeding a retiring, long-term predecessor, the opportunity arose to take the strategic management course classroom into the campus' applied setting of human resource management issues and practices.

Human resource management is itself a service function, providing service 1) to all organization employees for employee benefits, training, performance appraisal, recruiting and selection, labor relations, and more; 2) to executive management through strategic input regarding staffing assessments and planning, legal compliance issues, Quality Management programs, employee wellness programs, and more, and 3) to the organization's respective communities, promoting organizational culture within as well as promoting a variety of citizenship and social responsibility actions across geographic, sociopolitical, industry, and other constituent communities. With this service orientation, HRM offered a potential learning laboratory to develop service-focused, management projects for students to combine the tenets of service with the skills of business.

The college's new Director of HRM inherited an office with few professional and/or support staff, and even more importantly, he entered a human resource management environment that was facing a variety of strategic changes in employee management. The college had experienced sustained academic, physical, and residential growth during the past decade, due in large part to the successful entrepreneurial style of its President during this ten-year period. As a result, the college had evolved from a commuter-based to a residential-based student population and environment. This expansion now suggested that the college was evolving through the organizational life cycle to a more mature phase, leading to increased organizational complexity, specialization, and faculty and staff personnel (Boone and Kurtz, 2005). Additional college-wide complexity, structure, and employees also created the need for a more functional structure (Wheelen & Hunger, 2004), with management changes needed for expanding employee delegation, employee empowerment, and employee specialization. These changes required a fresh perspective to address needed revisions to policies and procedures to effectively manage the expanded numbers of employees and employee issues. These changes also created the opportunity to take the strategic management classroom to the applied setting of campus human resource management issues.

## **Administrator Focus/Concerns**

Prior to these strategic management projects, student-administrator learning interactions on campus had consisted of service learning projects conducted in campus office settings (Peters et al., 2006). One such project through the human resource management office had helped increase sexual harassment awareness across campus, and other students had worked with student life and the athletic department. These projects had been limited in scope, however, basically giving students only fundamental experience in an office setting.

This strategic management course concept of incorporating experiential learning projects was developed by recognizing that the human resource management office was facing strategic changes in employee management. Having students addressing strategic management issues that could involve them directly in campus governance with decision makers was a new concept at the college, and the Human Resource Management Director's interest and concerns were critically important.

The Director's interest stemmed from his belief and perception that HRM had a lot to offer students, that it was "a perfect mechanism for connecting class and real-work" (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005). The Director was interested because he felt the projects could be "meaningful, not make believe work... represented a progressive educational opportunity... [and] a progressive educational institution was the type of institution the college sought to be" (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005). Furthermore, he liked to innovate and be creative, bridging class and application with projects and a concept that had never been done on campus before (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005).

The Director's primary concern was the reaction of Administration to exposing these HRM issues to students and directly involving these students as consultants. While he felt these issues were benign, and yet still challenging for the students, he also recognized that students were the customers of the college, and organizations "don't usually go to their customers and say, 'Here are our internal problems, and how do we solve them?'" (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005).

The Director enlisted the support of the President by suggesting the students would be an extension of his staff. It was a new and interesting opportunity for the human resource management office to connect directly with faculty and students. Following the Director's "higher education is a business" philosophy, the projects would allow his office to address specific significant issues, rationales, and insights in a new yet monitored forum during the semester (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005).

In addition to developing information for the HRM Director to use in establishing governance procedures and policies on campus, it was also envisioned that the student groups could present their findings and recommendations directly to the President's Cabinet, the college's interdisciplinary, strategic policy makers. The Cabinet consisted of senior management at the college, including Vice Presidents, the President, and the Board of Trustees. Therefore, these college seniors in this capstone strategic management course would have access to top-level strategic decision makers, resulting in direct input to directly affect college policies and college governance.

## Course Format and Process

The initial course structure was purposely loose, as the Director and instructor recognized that the projects needed to reflect what “we wanted the students to think about... [in] somewhat of a controlled challenge” (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005). It would also require the instructor and the Director to invest subsequent time in class and for other meetings to provide direction, updates, presentations, and evaluation.

In consultation with the HRM Director, this strategic management course was redesigned for student groups to serve as strategic management consultants, under the joint direction of the Director and the instructor, to provide manpower to develop information and direction for human resource management regarding a selected set of important issues and topics. The Director and the instructor reviewed the Director’s list of potential topics for those that met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Timeframe—progress possible within the semester-length course
2. Complexity—topic required generalist-level, not specialized knowledge
3. Resource availability—additional employees and other sources were available as resources for further knowledge and insights
4. Workload—project group size was determined to be six members, so the topic would need to be extensive enough to offer sufficient functions and activities to sustain six-member groups
5. Sensitivity—appropriate for student consideration and input
6. Applicability—challenging, working world-based foundation

After reviewing the Director’s initial set of two dozen topics, the Director and the instructor selected four topics: 1) compensation, 2) orientation, 3) time-off policies, and 4) workforce planning. These projects, and the information developed by the student-consultants, would serve as a vehicle to teach the students, their instructor, and the new HRM Director, simultaneously, about each topic.

Twenty-four senior business majors, twelve male and twelve female, enrolled in this capstone course. These students were traditional undergraduate seniors, approximately 21 years of age in the fall of their senior year, with little to no professional experience. Classroom discussions indicated the students’ work experiences were predominantly part-time and seasonal, mostly retail rather than office settings, with one student having family business experience that involved scheduling. Because the capstone business strategy and policy course was required of all senior business majors, regardless of their functional area concentration (accounting, finance, human resource management, information systems, marketing, and operations), no prior coursework in HRM was required. Thus, only 9% (N=2) of the students had completed the survey HRM course, although two other students were enrolled concurrently. Since nearly all of the strategic management students had no HRM background, the instructor added specific conceptual and practical HRM content to the classroom discussions to provide students the basic HRM information they would need for their specific HRM projects.

These students self-selected their HRM topic, with all six students in each of the four groups receiving their first or second choice. Student groups, or representatives of a group, would then meet with the instructor and/or the Director in either scheduled or impromptu meetings. Email was used to promote communication among the participants to schedule interactions and to detail the information learned in meetings and other research, as well as to provide subsequent direction for the project.

In addition, class time was devoted periodically for students to discuss informally their problems, responses, and progress experienced in developing these projects. One self-selected member of each group would lead discussion addressing the group's current activities and issues, and all other students and the instructor would offer comments to help the group proceed. Students discovered that despite their different projects, they were experiencing similar issues that needed to be addressed, such as finding campus and outside information sources, internal group process issues, and the logistics of scheduling interviews and group meetings. As a result, these information- and experience-sharing sessions expanded communication, decision making, and strategic planning for all groups.

### **Preliminary Presentations**

Although this strategic management course offered a new avenue for utilizing experiential learning, it still retained the analytical framework of the traditional case- and text-focused strategic management courses. Focusing on integrating curriculum-wide learning objectives, students used the Dess et al. (2005) strategic management case analysis and presentation frameworks that emphasized SWOT Analyses (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to identify, analyze, and develop strategic alternatives and recommendations for resolving complex business problems. These frameworks were initially learned through case assessments, and then employed in addressing the four human resource management topics.

Building on the course focus that these students would shortly be business professionals, and more importantly, that all interactions among professionals are a form of either a formal or an informal presentation, the course was designed to maximize opportunities for student presentations of their progress and results. These presentations consisted of both informal, seminar-style discussions in class, as well as formal PowerPoint® presentations.

The first presentation occurred during the third week of the course, when students formally presented a self-selected article from a weekly news magazine. These fifteen-minute presentations were ungraded, simply for feedback, and were designed to provide initial group process development while simultaneously helping all students overcome presentation anxieties and polish PowerPoint® and other presentation skills in preparation for the more formal graded presentations to follow. Following the student group presentation, the instructor asked questions for approximately ten minutes.

Two weeks following these ungraded presentations, student groups presented a textbook case that was graded. To vary the teaching mode, rather than having questions solely from the instructor for this second set of case presentations, one group presented the case, including recommendations, while a second group responded to this presentation by critiquing and then leading

class questions and discussions. Thus, both groups were expected to have prepared the case, and the critiquing group would lead discussion about the content of the case plus the analyses and recommendations presented by the other group. Group roles would be reversed for the next presentation so each group would have the opportunity to both present and critique a case. The cases were varied, as were the group matches. For example, if Group One presented and Group Two critiqued the first case, the following presentation would have Group One critiquing Group Four's presentation and Group Two presenting to Group Three's critique. While the presenting group was graded, the critiquing group was not graded.

### **Integrating Functional Areas**

Yet another teaching mode was employed to create interactions across groups, both to simulate a matrix organization and to help students gather functional area environment information more efficiently by working collaboratively rather than independently. Within each project group, students were also required to self-select a specific functional area of management to study, with the restriction that a student could not choose his/her own business major concentration (e.g., a finance major could not choose finance, etc.). These six functional areas, which corresponded to the business school departments and divisions, were:

1. Finance/Accounting
2. Legal
3. Management/HRM
4. Management Information Systems
5. Operations Management
6. Marketing

Thus, each of the six functional area groups consisted of four students, one student from each of the four HRM topic groups. As an example, one member from each of the compensation, orientation, time-off policies, and workforce planning groups chose to focus on marketing, and these four students, now constituting the marketing subgroup, worked collectively and collaboratively to address the marketing environment for the college, e.g., the college's competitive niche, outside competitors, etc. Similarly, the finance representatives from each project group convened to gather internal and external environment information pertaining to finance, including operational budget figures, projected capital budgets, national and regional economic indicators, projected admissions pool and rates of enrollment, etc., which could affect the college's need and cost for additional capital. Management Information Systems representatives assessed the state of technology on campus and off, including equipment, personnel, telecommunications, research and development trends, etc. to consider the impact on college financial, infrastructure, and capital requirements. In summary, the functional area sub-teams offered an additional opportunity for students to experience a matrix organizational structure and a new set of group-forming norms while simultaneously collaborating on developing critical information that was relevant to each HRM project. Through the collective membership across the HRM topic groups, the respective functional area information was jointly and more efficiently developed and, in turn, was then equally available to the four human resource management topic groups for their assessment in developing their strategic recommendations. These functional area groups also then presented a

twenty-minute, graded presentation of their findings and recommendations to the class, plus a formal written report of seven to ten pages.

## **Final Presentations**

As their final assignments, students presented their human resource management problem, research, analyses, and recommendations to the Human Resource Management Director, the Associate Director, the instructor, and the class. The presentations were approximately 20 minutes, with an additional 15 minutes of questions open to all in attendance. In addition, the students submitted both a printed and electronic copy of their approximately 10 to 12 page formal report of their HRM topic, as well as electronically submitting a copy of the PowerPoint® presentation to both the instructor and the Director.

## **Outcomes**

### **Student Project Findings**

1. **Compensation:** The college utilized a market-driven compensation system, and the student group studied industry movement and comparability across a predetermined set of comparison colleges. Based on their findings, which were presented to the Board of Trustees by the Director, the human resource management office instituted a review of the current salary structure. Salary system grades and steps were reviewed, as the college was moving toward a broad-banding compensation system.
2. **Orientation:** The human resource management office utilized student findings to consolidate and augment faculty and staff/administration orientation programs. Both programs were reviewed and revised to be more consistent and more concise, and were further emphasized by holding biweekly meetings. Program content was expanded beyond their previous solitary focus on employee benefits to include a more detailed history of the college, an increased emphasis of the Augustinian philosophy that is the philosophical foundation of the college, and additional information regarding sexual harassment and other college policies. Process changes were implemented to expedite the processing of employee forms by having new employees receive and complete the necessary forms at home before submitting them to the human resource management office.
3. **Time-off:** In response to the students' findings, the human resource management office created a new administration / staff policy committee to research a fundamental change in managing time-off for college employees. Instead of the multiple time-off categories then used by the college (e.g., sick leave, personal time, etc.), the new committee would explore the use of a single bank of employee time-off, whereby the multiple categories would be collapsed into a combined pool of paid time-off for each employee. The new policy was anticipated to reduce administrative monitoring while simultaneously empowering the employees. A second change eliminated the sick leave bank, which was replaced with short-term disability insurance for employees, and amended sick leave policy to better relate to the Family Medical Leave Act for employees to better provide elder, child, and spousal care. Yet another change occurred as the college instituted two paid days per year of Community Service to encourage external volunteer work by employees that reflected the campus-wide commitment of service as an Augustinian community.

4. Workforce planning: These findings began the process of developing mechanisms for determining the “right people, right skills, right progress” (J. Yanagi, April 12, 2005). Following the class presentation, the group’s proposals, which included developing prospective selection planning and employee inventories to identify employee performance, skills, and talent, were presented by the HRM Director to the President for further study to help assess the ability of the college workforce to support the future of the college.

### **Project Information: Role in Governance**

As anticipated by the HRM Director, the information developed in these student projects “either initiated or reinforced” policy and program actions to affect college policies and governance (J. Yanagi, April 12, 2005). While initially it had been hoped that students could present in person to the President’s Cabinet (Vice-President Level), the logistics of the end of semester and the executive-level time availability made this presentation impossible to schedule. Nevertheless, subsequent to the students’ presentations, the Director incorporated aspects of these findings in discussions with the senior administration of the college, including the President, members of the President’s Cabinet, and members of the Board of Trustees, regarding human resource management issues pertaining to college governance. Thus, the students’ findings served as input for the top-level strategic decision makers of the college and supported subsequent strategic human resource management decisions, actions, governance procedures, and policies implemented across campus activities by the human resource management office.

### **Human Resource Management Director Reaction**

In reviewing the process, content, and outcomes from these student projects, the Human Resource Management Director was very positive regarding his first merging of academics and administration. While some groups were stronger than others, he summarized that the students overall had made the projects, content, and process “interesting, with good insights.” They had done good research, including conducting their campus-wide orientation and benefits survey. The Director had liked the functional approach to the projects that integrated financial, marketing, and other functional areas in considering issues related to human resource management. Furthermore, he was also pleased that the projects had involved a variety of other campus resources, i.e., administrators and staff, and hoped that subsequent projects could have further resources, including campus and consultant subject matter experts, available to students as well (J. Yanagi, June 27, 2005).

### **Student Responses**

Formal student reactions were collected through the college’s course evaluation process as students completed their final presentations. Unfortunately, these evaluations focused on the instructor and not on course content or process, and no student chose to add specific written comments about the course projects or content. During the semester, however, in class and in meetings with the Director and/or the instructor, and again at the conclusion of the course, approximately half the students offered anecdotal comments about their attitudes and their experiences regarding the course and their projects. These anecdotal comments mirrored previous student comments from similar projects about a sense of increased teamwork, communication, and

learning and value (Kenworthy-'Ren, 2000, p. 56). Students also perceived increased "accomplishment, confidence, skills, professionalism, [and] purpose" (Madsen, 2004, p. 331), a chance to implement what they learned (Chandler, 2000, p. 118), to see the "big picture" and to increase understanding and retention (Michaelsen, Kenderine, Hobbs, & Frueh, 2000, p. 160).

The course instructor also noted the increased motivation by the students in interacting with the Director, which seemed to mirror the positive aura attending the outside practitioner, being so different from known professors (Madsen, 2004). Motivation also appeared to be increased principally because students' work could be directly utilized by the college—work site input with work site applicability by work site practitioners. In reconstructing these students' comments, the Director and the instructor noted that students fully appreciated the Director's perspective, balance, and availability, both in class and in group meetings. Students universally found these real-time projects to be much more interesting than case studies. From the commitment and attitudes of the students, it was evident to the Director and to the instructor that these projects reflected a heightened sense of task identity for the students related to their involvement at the college. One student stated that because of the projects, the course was the best he had taken at the college.

Students also noted that the projects led to an increased personal commitment to the college and to their education in general. In one enlightened exchange, one student felt these projects created a legacy of contribution for their role in helping shape human resource management policies for college governance, and several students stated that they hoped that the college would consider more formally adopting and supporting these types of project opportunities in the future.

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

Positive student learning outcomes and growth were evident in a variety of areas. The projects provided a learning laboratory for students to generate an improved understanding of some of the personal and organizational expectations of the working world. By developing projects that addressed working-world problems in working-world settings, students experienced real-world interactions with bona fide managers facing bona fide issues, yet they were still protected because they were functioning in a controlled environment. Both the Director and the instructor were available as coaches, mentors, negotiators, and protectors who could provide direction as needed while also providing a safety net to reduce potential missteps. Yet within this controlled, learning laboratory framework, students also developed their individual research and analytical skills, their group process, interaction, and presentation skills, and their incipient subordinate-supervisor relationships necessary for organizational success following graduation.

Students had multiple opportunities to receive feedback from the instructor, the Director, and their classmates through group presentations, group activities, and their individual and group meetings with the instructor and the Director. Feedback was also available from outside their project groups, both when they were critiqued by another group as well as when they worked in their functional area groups. Their participation in these second functional area groups also presented an additional group process opportunity whereby students had to be task-focused yet adept at group process in order to create an effective presentation product within a relatively short timeframe.

Student grades were determined by both the instructor and the Director by incorporating multiple criteria during the course. Their graded presentations (initial, functional area, HRM final project) were evaluated using a presentation rubric that considered their command of the presentation content and format as well as their electronic presentation (PowerPoint®) and their behavioral presentation skills (verbal communication, enthusiasm, stage presence, etc.). Each presentation was weighted as 20 percent of their overall grade. The final HRM presentation also included a written report that was evaluated for its content, structure, grammar, and spelling, and similarly counted 20 percent toward the final grade.

The final component of the student grade, also 20 percent, was a participation grade that considered each student's comments and conduct in class and in their two groups (HR and functional area). As input for this grade, the instructor assessed student's class contributions (e.g., questions, insights, attendance, etc.), but an additional input came from each student, who completed three peer evaluation forms during the semester. Students completed peer evaluations following their 1) first in-class graded presentation, 2) functional area presentation, and 3) final HRM project presentation. Using a five-point Likert scale, students compared their own task and process contributions with each group member before determining an overall rating between zero and 100 for him/herself and for each other group member. The instructor considered these data in conjunction with his assessment of each student's participation to determine the student's overall participation grade.

One specific learning objective involved improving student communication skills, both individually and collaboratively. Students participated in four different formal presentations where every member of the group was required to contribute equally to developing presentation content and to orally presenting their material. Thus, all students were actively involved in writing and speaking for these presentations and their related formal papers. In addition, students improved their listening skills, both during their own presentations and especially as a member of their group when critiquing another group's presentation and analyses. Further improvement was also noted in their electronic presentation skills, as each group developed professional PowerPoint® presentations that effectively incorporated content, color, external pictures, program art, and motion.

A second learning objective related to enhancing student quantitative and qualitative reasoning in problem identification and problem solving. Through student research and analyses, which involved a) on-campus data gathering and interviews, b) off-campus data gathering by contacting outside colleges, and c) traditional library and internet research, students improved their abilities to integrate, synthesize, apply, and present complex information effectively. Students then used their research and analyses to provide decision making input for the administration to determine policy responses to provide improved competitive advantages for the college.

In addition, students were involved in dynamic working world environments that required them to adapt to locally- and externally-induced changes, e.g., new personnel on campus, external economic conditions that affected campus financial resources, regulatory and immigration/visa availability changes, etc. Developing information and interacting with various members of the faculty and administration, students were faced with both confirming and disconfirming informa-

tion that necessitated their assessments and communication. They routinely responded to time pressures, directional changes, and personalities, all of which had to be considered in creating their final products.

Yet another learning objective involved the students improving their abilities to understand and utilize the breadth of their prior learning across the business and college-wide curricula to develop management decisions appropriate for their current projects. In making decisions about alternatives and recommendations for their group projects, students also considered the dynamic interactions across the functional areas of business. These decisions were not parochial, win-lose choices that pitted project against project. Instead, and more appropriately and more effectively, these decisions promoted project recommendations that supported the strategic and education missions for the betterment of the college. Through these projects, students understood their contributions to changing campus human resource management policies and procedures that could improve the environment of current and future college employees.

### **Unanticipated Benefits**

While these projects were devised initially to develop students' skills and insights and to develop policy input for the human resource management office, the projects also led to additional, unanticipated benefits. As noted earlier, the Director was interested in working with students, and both the instructor and the Director were energized intellectually by employing these practitioner projects to augment classroom activities. This collegial energy also translated into expanded and improved connections between the human resource management office and the faculty in the Business School. The success of these initial projects led the Director and the instructor to create additional opportunities for students in subsequent semesters, although slightly modifying the issues and focus in a subsequent strategic management course.

In addition, because both parties recognized they shared the mutual goal of developing compensation and benefit programs that would promote faculty and staff selection and retention, the human resource management office's role was expanded concerning faculty compensation issues at the college level, as the Director was invited to participate *ex officio* on the Faculty Senate Salary and Benefits Committee. Toward this goal, the Director also enlisted the participation of the Provost, which thereby increased access and communication across the faculty and the administration. This access became especially important as the Salary and Benefits Committee became more involved in addressing changes in faculty salary and benefits determinations. Thus, using the human resource management projects conducted by the Director and the instructor as a starting point, the Director became directly involved with the academic mission of the college and was ultimately able to contribute his expertise and experience to further academic, human resource management, and organizational missions on campus.

### **Conclusions**

These management- and service-focused projects succeeded for students, faculty, and administration alike. They succeeded because the Director of Human Resource Management committed his senior management support while simultaneously enlisting the President's executive management support. They succeeded because the instructor and Director were able to jointly

1) develop project outlines, 2) offer strategic direction and alternatives, and 3) facilitate student research and presentations of their policy content and recommendations to share with the senior decision makers of the campus. They succeeded because the students diligently and professionally sought information that was then developed into content-based recommendations within the strategic analysis framework, which were sufficiently sophisticated for senior management to consider in making human resource management policy decisions and actions at the college.

The instructor and others (e.g., Clark, 2000; Madsen, 2004; Peters et al., 2006) have previously conducted service-learning projects in human resource management courses, but without the direct involvement of the senior management of the organization. The level of support and commitment by the Human Resource Management Director extended well beyond other similar projects where a practitioner simply served as the titular project contact. During the semester, the Director attended approximately eight hours of class, which included the mid-term and final presentations, and he devoted approximately ten additional hours meeting with the project groups. He viewed this commitment of time as cost-effective in that his benefits in terms of research and presentation far exceeded what he could have developed individually with a similar investment of time. This increased involvement, from course design, to course evaluation, to course extension to the President and his Cabinet, gave the student projects extensive cachet for affecting and improving college HRM policies.

As such, these projects created shared learning benefits for students, faculty, and administration. The working world projects and upper level management involvement created high energy levels for all participants. It was exciting for the students to address practitioner issues and settings. It was exciting for the instructor and the Director to venture together to develop a new course collaboration and campus partnership. And it was exciting for all involved to witness the changes in campus HRM policies that were directly attributable to the research, process, and presentation efforts of the students, the Director, and the instructor. All participants were extensively invested in this course, and the rewards extended far beyond classroom performance and grading. Students expressed a heightened commitment to their course, their college, and their futures, and the ongoing benefits of faculty/administration collaborations are evinced in current faculty benefits inputs and determinations.

The students in this course were traditional aged, minimally-experienced, full-time undergraduate seniors majoring in business. Therefore, this experiential strategic planning project afforded them a rich learning opportunity, yet older, nontraditional students would likely gain at least as rich a learning opportunity. Nontraditional students bring expanded employment and life experiences into their classroom and to the project setting. They are able to incorporate these experiences with the material they are learning, thereby providing a broader framework for experiencing and applying this material to current and future situations. Indeed, their expanded context should be embraced in the classroom and used as additional teaching moments for all students, faculty, administrators, and other course participants.

One area of concern for extending this course structure would be the time commitment necessary to conduct the projects. Time commitment must consider both the time needed to develop the projects as well as the student's time availability outside of class for researching and meeting about the projects. While the current course successfully used a semester-length format, the pro-

jects also could have been expanded into a two-semester format. The additional time could have enabled project teams to research their topics more broadly and in greater depth. The expanded time frame would also benefit students with full-time employment by increasing opportunities for additional content development and learning.

By addressing these time factors, it seems reasonable nevertheless to expect that these types of projects could be similarly successful on other campuses and in other venues. Projects developed around issues in student life and/or campus security could be particularly effective, as students would likely fully understand many of these issues simply from living on campus. Similarly, financially-focused projects could involve selected budget priorities and decisions that affect campus policies regarding students (e.g., tuition determinations, cost-benefit analyses for assessing campus fees), whereby students benchmark the use and amount of such costs at comparable colleges, followed by developing policy alternatives and recommendations. Furthermore, while many campus committees include modest student representation, specific academic-focused projects could also be developed in a course whereby students work with the Deans and/or the Provost to create policy recommendations for issues of accreditation, curriculum and teaching methods, external events, etc. In these cases, the academic administration would represent senior management and participate by sharing their administrative expertise related to academic issues.

In short, these types of student-driven strategic management projects can succeed across the campus. Senior management commitment can be developed through faculty/administration collaborations to articulate direction and expectations, and student commitment is enhanced through their direct involvement with managers outside the classroom, their cultural understanding of the issues involved, and especially their recognizing that their input will be directly applied to policy implementations related to these projects. Therefore, these learning laboratories extend beyond the classroom, beyond the two-dimensional cases, and into the three dimensions of the campus Board room.

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