The Instructor's Role in the Student Consulting Process: Working with the Student Team

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Student consulting is offered by many colleges and universities in the United States. These consulting projects are a critical component of the courses in which they are offered. Typically, students work on a consulting assignment in teams. In this paper, we examine how the instructor can help student teams reach their potential by adjusting the team formation process, influencing the selection of team leaders, encouraging teams to delegate responsibilities and providing on-going support. The implications of the suggested team-building and enhanced instructor engagement strategies for managing the relationship with the client and streamlining the consulting process are discussed.

Working on class projects in teams has become expected in undergraduate and graduate courses, and is widely used in business education. Furthermore, many business schools offer student consulting to real-world organizations instead of asking students to complete traditional research projects. Students may spend much of the academic term helping a company address the challenges they are currently facing. The Small Business Institute (SBI) has provided support for many U.S. colleges dedicated to furthering the practice of student consulting. The goals of student consulting projects are complex. They include helping students to learn course concepts more thoroughly as well as developing skills that will help them succeed professionally. In particular, the objective of such courses is to facilitate development of communication skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and teamwork skills (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005; Heriot, Cook, Simpson, & Parker, 2008; Thomas & Busby, 2003;)

Student consulting is also attractive for the client organizations for at least three reasons. First, student consulting may produce economic benefits for the clients in the form of greater likelihood to survive, improved revenues, and profitability (Chrisman & Katrishen, 1995; Chrisman & McMullan, 2004). Second, this expected benefit comes at a fairly low cost, as some colleges offer student consulting for free while others charge relatively small fees compared to professional consultants (Banjo, 2009; Zwalhen, 2009). To make it more affordable, these fees are often calculated based on the firm's revenues so that smaller firms pay less than larger firms. Third, student consulting facilitates the incorporation of academic expertise into the process of analyzing and improving existing business practices, thereby helping bridge the divide between academics and practitioners (Bartunek, 2007).

Many of the clients are receptive to new ideas and willing to re-examine their own assumptions and practices (Young, 2009). Consulting can also provide many benefits to students: hands-on learning on how to analyze and solve problems in real-world settings, the opportunity to improve communication skills, and the potential to increase self-efficacy and self-confidence. On the flip side, student consulting engagements could be much more difficult and time-consuming for students as well challenging to manage for instructors compared to regular team projects. Furthermore, consulting may give rise to unique problems that may undermine the discussed benefits of an immersion-based educational practice. Dysfunctional student teams may also undermine the process and efficacy of regular teaching. Moreover, the consequences of having dysfunctional student teams in courses offering student consulting could be even more dramatic. In fact, dysfunctional student teams could generate low-quality reports that benefit neither the client, nor the students, and could put a blemish on the reputation of the institution. It is important, therefore, to reexamine the process of student consulting and identify

the typical problems that often arise as a result of various inadequacies in team formation and leadership as well as propose solutions and recommendations to help the instructor manage the student consulting process more effectively, especially with regard to making student teams more effective, to help students deal with the inherent complexity of the consulting assignments, and to generate actual economic impact in a given region.

The accomplishment of the key objectives of a student consulting course – teaching students important course concepts and skills – hinges on a number of factors. Intriguingly, while the quality of the output improves when students work in teams as compared to working alone, increasing team size beyond two members (i.e., a dyad) typically produces no additional benefits (Bacon, Stewart, & Stewart-Belle, 1998). This may be because of various inefficiencies of group work discovered in prior research (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojzisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007; Rudolph, Wells, Weller, & Baltes, 2009). Some common reasons for such inefficiencies include challenges in coordinating schedules, the presence of free-riders, the varying abilities of the team members, concerns regarding accountability and fairness as it relates to the amount of input and the resulting grade and teams' failure to utilize their members' particular competencies in the course of undertaking a project (Brodbeck et al., 2007). Much of student frustration with teamwork experience, in our view, could be due to the fact that instructors often do not provide sufficient training and guidance on how to work best in teams or do not have appropriate processes in place that would help a team to realize its potential (e.g., Alie, Beam and Carey, 1998; Bolton, 1999; O'Connor and Yballe, 2007; Wilcoxson, 2006). The typical approach of assigning teams, explaining the project, and then evaluating the final product at the end of the term may set students up to fail because of the implicit (but often erroneous) assumption that they have previously mastered team management skills. The challenges faced by student teams are exacerbated in student consulting projects due to the additional demands and constraints often imposed on the instructors to simultaneously recruit and manage clients, and supervise students (Ames & Hugstad, 2000; Cook, Belliveau, & Campbell, 2012; Heriot & Campbell, 2002).

Though much has been written on how to create and manage courses that incorporate team projects (e.g., Ames & Hugstad, 2000; Hansen, 2006; Volekma, 2010), our goal is to focus on the unique dynamics involved in teaching courses that incorporate SBI-managed student consulting projects. The challenge of meeting the expectations of students while satisfying external clients as well as following the guidelines set by external organizations, especially the Small Business Institute, can impose constraints on instructors in terms of course design and team management. Fortunately, if done well, student consulting has the potential to enhance the quality of student education as well as to deliver a valuable service to the local business community while providing a less costly and, oftentimes, superior alternative to professional consulting.

THE STUDENT CONSULTING TEAM

The student consulting process starts with the recruitment of clients. Once the information regarding client businesses is passed on to the instructor, teams are formed based on the students' desire to work on a particular project. From the student's perspective, the team formation process formally begins their consulting project. The established model of team formation is broken down into five stages. It posits that teams go through five discrete stages: (1) forming; (2) storming; (3) norming; (4) performing; and (5) adjourning (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

The forming stage is often characterized by individual and collective anxiety due to a significant element of uncertainty and insufficient information about the consulting project requirements. Sometimes students have already formed groups in the past they like so much that such groups are essentially reassembled in successive classes given the instructor's permission. In this case, of course, anxiety, uncertainty and confusion could be less. In contrast, new, freshly-minted groups are often unclear as to
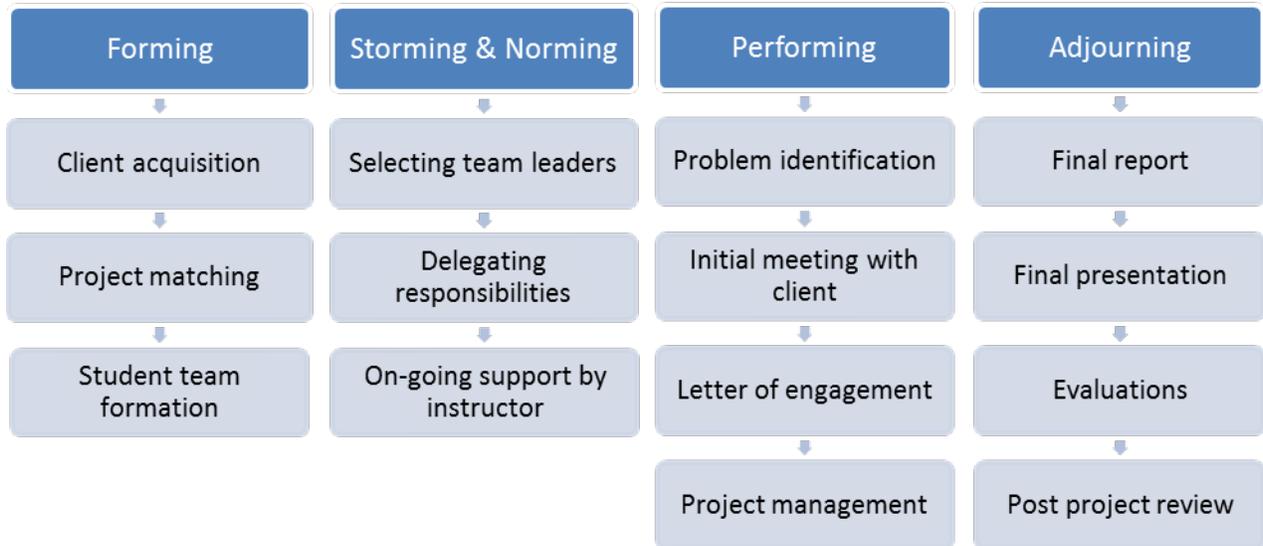
their purpose, structure, leadership and the leader's abilities as well as the skills level and drive of individual members and their actual willingness to collaborate. Many students may have had unsuccessful experiences in the past. Adding to this anxiety, uncertainty and confusion regarding the team is that the students often worry that they are required to deliver something of value to clients often paying for the output while knowing little about what is expected of them and whether or not they really have what it takes to be able to provide professional advice to individuals and organizations.

Once the members start to see themselves as a group rather than merely a collection of strangers and get to know each other a little better so that individual skills as well as personality traits transpire, they move to the second stage (storming). This stage is often characterized by conflict and tension between team members as they begin to adjust to one another's distinct learning, communication, and personal styles. The storming stage can be considered complete when a level of agreement on how the group will be led and managed is finally reached. The team then moves to the norming stage, where group members develop standards of expected behavior and begin to feel more like a cohesive unit. Next is the performing stage, in which the team is focused on getting the key tasks completed. Then, after the work is finalized, the group enters the adjourning stage, where they prepare for disbandment by wrapping up their activities. At this stage, it is critical to make sure that the student consulting project is effectively communicated to the client, and all the requirements provided by the instructor are satisfied.

A key limitation of the five-stage model is that the time it takes to move through the stages and what happens at each stage may vary widely from one group to another. Teams that are set up on a temporary basis and have relatively short lifespans are not likely to progress gradually through each stage; there is just not enough time for such step-by-step evolution. Instead, temporary project-based groups are more likely to follow the punctuated equilibrium model of group development (Gersick, 1988). In this model, the first team meeting sets the direction and determines patterns of behaviors for the group – deciding how to approach the project, how the team will be organized and who will lead. Subsequently, the group often goes through alternating stages of inertia and transformational change. Inertia is the phase where the team is either inactive or makes very slow progress on its intended activities. At some point, however – often as the deadline approaches or the client or instructor requires changes – the team undergoes a transformational change. This is a major transition characterized by abandoning old patterns and adopting new perspectives, with the objective to dramatically increase the group's advancement toward its goals. Typically, the first time the team enters the transformational stage occurs about halfway between the start of the project and the deadline. From a student consulting project perspective, the punctuated equilibrium model indicates the importance of the first team meeting and instructors managing the team process properly as it can significantly affect the overall experience and outcomes.

The five-stage model and the punctuated equilibrium model of group formation and functioning represent alternative perspectives on organizing group formation and activities (Chang, Bordia, & Duck, 2003). The first model suggests that teams typically go through a number of necessary stages in their maturation, affected by the tasks that need to be completed and the timeline to be followed. The second model is focused on how to achieve and leverage the stages of transformational change helping to increase productivity and performance. We will use these alternative perspectives to develop a better understanding of the SBI-guided student consulting process. Consequently, we will utilize the two models in discussing how student teams are formed, develop and mature, the dynamics of interaction between the instructor and student groups performing the SBI-guided consulting for business clients, and the problems arising at different stages of group formation, evolution and disbandment that may require interference and assistance on the part of the instructor. Figure 1 represents the group formation process, adjusted to the specific process flow associated with student consulting as detailed by Cook, Belliveau, and Campbell (2012).

Figure 1: *Group Formation in the SBI Student Team Consulting Process*

Forming	Storming & Norming	Performing	Adjourning
Client acquisition	Selecting team leaders	Problem identification	Final report
Project matching	Delegating responsibilities	Initial meeting with client	Final presentation
Student team formation	On-going support by instructor	Letter of engagement	Evaluations
		Project management	Post project review

FORMING TEAMS

In regards to student consulting, the first decision that the instructor faces is what process to use to form teams. The outcome is typically assessed based on the degree to which the formed teams are homogeneous or heterogeneous (Bowers, Pharmer, & Salas, 2000). The key advantage of heterogeneous teams – whose members may differ in their experience, availability, skill sets, preferences, age, ethnicity, language and gender – is that they are more likely to have complementary skills that could be helpful for successfully completing the consulting project. For instance, in undergraduate classes such groups may include both individuals with quantitative and qualitative skills or writing skills and social skills. In graduate-level classes, such groups may include accounting, finance, marketing and management or IT majors. Having students with various majors in one group may allow for delivering more effective multidimensional and comprehensive analysis. Although the potential for miscommunication may increase with team diversity (Schippers, Den Hartog, Koopman, & Wienk, 2003), the synergistic benefits of having multiple perspectives often offset such shortcomings. A possible way to benefit from heterogeneity while also controlling for its potential downside is to create heterogeneous teams and teach students how to work well in these teams by helping them acquire diversity-management skills (Shaw, 2004).

Although homogeneous teams may not have all the required skills or sufficient expertise in all the functional areas, their biggest strength is that they tend to be more cohesive, at least initially Cohesion can lead to improved team performance (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Wolfe & Box, 1988). Given the relatively short duration of the academic term, this initial cohesion may allow the teams to become productive faster. This may be why a survey of first-year MBA students who picked their own teams reported that they had a more positive team experience and were more likely to turn in their assignments on time, cooperate well and have fewer free-loaders than students who were randomly assigned to teams (Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999). Other studies (e.g., Hilton & Phillips, 2010) have reached similar conclusions as to the merits of student-selected teams. But instructor-formed teams also have their proponents (e.g., Hernandez, 2002). A multi-year study of undergraduates found that when the instructor has a hand in forming teams, it is less likely that unexpected changes in team membership will hinder team performance (Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003).

In sum, the existing research on which method of student team formation is superior appears to be inconclusive. In practice, the decision on how to form teams depends on how much the instructor wants to be involved in the process and influence the results and how much the students will be allowed and want to be involved in the process and influence the results. The four principal methods of team formation are: (1) student-selected, (2) random, (3) instructor-formed, and (4) student-guided. Student-selected teams are formed by students themselves without any instructor assistance. Random teams are those in which the instructor assigns students to teams without any knowledge of the skills and experiences of the students. Instructor-formed teams are those in which the students are assigned to teams by the instructor on the basis of certain criteria, such as diversity in educational backgrounds or work experience. The final option (student-guided) is to allow the students to select teams themselves while providing the guidelines that they must follow.

The first consideration, as to what method of team formation to use, is whether or not and to what extent the students should be involved in the process and influence the results. When students are granted full autonomy in the team formation process, they typically form teams based on previous affiliations or proximity. These affiliations are often based on who they are sitting closer to on the day of team formation (Connerley & Mael, 2001). Very little thought is put into the knowledge, skills and abilities that each member brings to the team. As a result, student-selected teams are more likely to be homogeneous in terms of skills and experiences, gender, age and other demographic variables. Of course, the proximity criteria used by students unfamiliar with each other could offer more diversity but no systematic attempt to benefit from the distribution of students' skills and abilities as well as demographic diversity. Obviously, the excessive homogeneity and complete randomness of group formation could create some problems in the future for the team and instructor.

However, the opposite choice – having no student involvement at all in the team selection process – is also problematic. Both the random assignment and instructor-formed team formation methods fit this profile. The benefits of these methods are that they most closely mimic the real world, where employees do not select their work teams. But both have significant shortcomings that may outweigh this advantage. Teams that are formed with student input have higher grades and higher levels of satisfaction compared to teams formed with no involvement from the students (Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000). Moreover, when students have a say in the team formation process, the resulting teams are more enthusiastic, better communicators, better able to resolve conflicts and more comfortable in asking one another for help than teams that are randomly assigned (Chapman, Meuter, Toy, & Wright, 2006). Of these two team formation methods, the process of randomly assigning students to teams may also have the additional shortcoming of being unfair because it leaves the team formation process purely to chance (Bacon, Stewart, & Anderson, 2001). By creating outcomes that are not under the instructor's control, random assignments may potentially create additional challenges for the group that could consist of strange bedfellows and the instructor in terms of managing the student teams. In our experience both of these methods are extremely unpopular with students.

The best way to try and combine the cohesion benefits of homogeneous teams with the complementarity benefits of heterogeneous teams is to use student-guided teams. We recommend that the formation of student-guided teams follow a two-stage process. At the first stage of the process, the instructor discusses the expectations for the project by starting with an overview of the consulting project process, and going over the grading criteria, deliverables, deadlines, and expected level of research. This discussion is designed to give the students a clear sense of the work that needs to be done by each team. It should be complemented with presenting a brief set of guidelines on what makes a good team (e.g., Thompson, 2008).

The second stage involves asking that students talk to one another. The goal is to let students learn about one another and then take what they learn into consideration when forming teams. One common method to achieve this is to give the students class time to informally interview one another. Another common method is to lead the students in an experiential exercise. The interview allows students to talk to one another and find out about each other's knowledge, skills, work styles, and anything else that they might find beneficial for selecting teammates. An example of an interview-based exercise designed to help students learn more about one another is the "picking a darn good team" exercise (Bruton, 2012). The experiential exercise allows students to gather information about one another through direct observation and interaction. As students participate in such exercises, they become able to better understand each other's strengths and weaknesses. This information can subsequently be incorporated when forming teams and, to help decide how to delegate responsibilities once the teams have been formed. In addition, such exercises can also be employed in the classroom following team formation to strengthen team cohesion and its problem-solving skills (for additional sample exercises see: Barker & Franzak, 1997; Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, & Ramsey, 2002).

At minimum, we recommend giving the students some time to interview one another. Time permitting it would be helpful to use both methods as they complement each other quite well. Experiential exercises allow students to learn about each other through direct observation and interaction, but this learning is limited to certain aspects of a person's abilities that are showcased based on the specific nature of the exercise. Most experiential exercises allow students to learn about soft skills related to a person's work style and likely contribution to a team effort. Interviews allow students to ask each other questions that are more directly related to the team formation process based on their own motivations and the project criteria. Students can ask questions to assess a person's likely contribution to the team, such as the person's availability, work experience, and knowledge. If both methods are used, we recommend doing the experiential exercise first so that the students are required to interact with more than just their friends, making them more likely to talk to a wider range of people during the interview process.

Some students who have taken other student consulting project courses may find this process repetitive. At the university where one of us is a faculty member, students in some majors take as many as five courses that incorporate student consulting projects. Nevertheless, this process is still worth repeating for at least two reasons. First, instructors are likely to have different expectations and it is important to clarify them upfront. Second, different courses may require different types of teams. For example, one author teaches a course that focuses on human resources while the other author teaches a capstone strategy course. In the human resources course, teams that have the most in-depth expert knowledge and related work experiences in the subject matter tend to do a better job meeting the client's expectations than other teams. In contrast, in the strategy course, the teams that have the most diverse knowledge in the various areas of business (e.g., finance, marketing, management, etc.) are best positioned to do well.

The major disadvantage of this process is that it creates additional work for the instructor. Fortunately, our experience suggests that a modest amount of effort is sufficient to yield the key benefits of this team formation process. Many of the steps suggested to facilitate the creation of student-guided teams the instructor is likely to conduct at some point in the semester anyway (e.g., discussing project expectations and grading criteria). Our recommendation is to discuss it prior to the formation of teams so that the students are more likely to form effective teams.

In summary, we recommend that student-guided teams be used because they strike the right balance between creating teams that have the complementary skills to be effective and teams that are sufficiently cohesive.

CHOOSING TEAM LEADERS

Once the teams are formed, the next step in the team formation process is to select a leader. Generally speaking, leaders set direction, coordinate team efforts, encourage participation by all team members, provide feedback on individual efforts, manage conflict, and facilitate the decision-making process (Hess, 2007). Leaders can also guide the process of going through the storming and norming stages. In the student consulting project setting, team leaders do more than oversee the team – they are also responsible for a portion of the work that must be done for the client.

Choosing a leader is an important decision and the instructor should guide students to make in order to avoid some common pitfalls that are associated with ineffective leadership: free-riding, inadequate learning, lack of team collaboration, and extensive conflict with the client or among group members. Teams without effective leadership tend to be dominated by free-riders (Holmer, 2001). Having one or more members who did not contribute to the group in a meaningful way can negatively affect the motivation (Karau & Williams, 1993; Kerr, 1983). The disruptive behaviors may also negatively affect the performance of the entire team (Jassawalla, Sashittal, & Malshe, 2009). Moreover, free-riding becomes more problematic as the size of the team increases (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, & Ramsey, 2002). Ineffective leadership also inhibits team collaboration and student learning. Without a leader, students often fall into the same roles they had in previous teams, which reduces their incentive to engage with other team members and inhibits learning. The result is multiple silos hindering team members' acquisition of new skills (Andre, 2011). Even worse, the lack of an effective leader means that team members do not communicate with one another and are unaware of others' problems and accomplishments until everyone presents their part of work for the final report. Unfortunately, by that point it is too late to make any significant changes and the project often turns out to be a disaster. Finally, ineffective leadership is positively correlated with role conflict and highly emotional, personal conflicts among team members (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007).

Ineffective leadership typically stems from the students not approaching the selection of team leader seriously enough or succumbing to those team members that seek group leadership without being properly qualified for this role. Oftentimes, we have observed that the group's choice of leader is based on criteria that have little or nothing to do with candidates' qualifications. In many cases, a leader will be chosen based on who volunteered to take on the role or who has the most time to devote to the course. When a leader is chosen arbitrarily, we have seen that it severely hinders the team's ability to collaborate effectively. In more than one instance, we have heard from students that were frustrated with their ineffective, hostile or unfriendly team leader.

Research suggests that team leaders may perform task-related and interpersonal roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948; Thompson, 2008). Task-related roles focus on coordinating the efforts of other team members; planning the work to be done; monitoring progress and addressing any problems that may arise. Interpersonal roles focus on managing the relationships and interactions between team members. Naturally, it could be very time consuming and emotionally exhaustive for leaders to perform these two complementary roles. We have heard many stories from team leaders about the long nights they have put in trying to consolidate individual write-ups into one cohesive report, responding to inquiries from the client, setting up meetings, getting updates on each team member's progress, and resolving conflicts. Due to the disproportionate amount of demands placed on leaders, it is vital that the team select a leader that is able to successfully perform these various roles that are vital to the team's success.

We encourage the selection of such a leader by first leading a discussion on the pros and cons of being a team leader. This conversation can occur before students have formed teams or after they have formed teams but before they have chosen a leader. We start the conversation by sharing our own experiences

as instructors who have worked with many team leaders, and then encourage students to share their own impressions of the team leaders they have worked with in the past. Specifically, we ask students to share the following: the tasks performed by their team leader, how well their leader performed these tasks, what their leader did particular well, and what their leader could have done better. This discussion is always lively as everyone has something to share – students who have been leaders divulge their first-hand experience of the role while others tell stories of effective or ineffective leadership. As students share their experiences, we reinforce and consolidate comments that address the level of effort put in by team leaders. We also write on the board best practices for team leaders as gathered through student comments. Inevitably, by the end of this discussion, the students are aware of the many additional responsibilities that are placed on the team leader.

Second, we recommend giving team leaders some incentives to take on the role. A simple way to do this is to allow leaders to have a say in the project grades of their teammates. This can be done by allocating a certain percentage of students' project grades to the evaluation of their team leader. If using individual evaluation methods, such as peer evaluations or contribution journals, another way to accomplish this same goal is to give the leaders' peer evaluations or journals more weight in determining each student's project grade than those from the rest of the team. Another incentive system that has been shown to raise team performance and reduce free-riding is to make the leader's grade based on the team's performance and to allow the leader to have a say in the project grade for their teammates (Ferrante, Green, & Forster, 2006). This incentive system mimics the real world, where managers have limited control over the team members but receive a disproportionate amount of credit if the project goes well or a disproportionate amount of criticism if it goes poorly.

Once the students have formed teams and chosen leaders, the instructor should learn about the teams that have been formed. There are at least two methods that can be used to accomplish this task. The first method, used by one of the authors, involves the instructor meeting with each team and finding out more about why they chose to work with each other and what skills they bring to the team. This author even asks students to move to another team if he feels that it would improve team effectiveness. The second method is to have the students write a short paper about why they want to work with the group they have chosen (Mello, 1993). This exercise forces each team member to justify the collective choice of teammates and leader. Through this effort the instructor gets a sense of the criteria the students used to form teams and whether the team members are likely to work together effectively.

DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITIES

Once a leader has been selected and roles have been assigned, the team members gradually begin to truly see themselves as a group. The final step to position the team to work effectively is to delegate tasks to each team member. Having specific tasks allocated to each team member and holding them accountable for their contributions further reduces the free-rider problem. While our experience suggests that many of the task-related and interpersonal roles are undertaken by the leaders, there are still tasks that can be delegated to other members of the team. Once the engagement letter has been agreed upon between the team and the client, each team member should be held responsible for one or more tasks that directly contribute to the completion of the project.

In order to determine whether a task should be delegated, we recommend applying the following criteria. First, the task should allow each team member to get involved with the project in a meaningful way. The importance of any tasks that are delegated as it relates to the project as a whole should be clear. Second, the team member should be able to complete the task independently. Team members will already have to engage with one another fairly often over the course of the academic term to complete the main components of the project. Based on our experience, the tasks that should be delegated to other members of the team are tasks that involve administrative duties. Common

examples of tasks that fit these criteria are: scheduling team meetings, compiling individual work into a single collective effort, compiling progress reports, filling out time sheets, and creating a template for the client presentation.

Although tasks can be formally assigned by the instructor, we recommend letting students decide who is going to do what task based on their interests, capabilities, majors and past experiences. To confirm these task assignments and establish other important team norms, we also recommend asking teams to create a social contract. Social contracts are a formalized version of psychological contracts, which are defined as the "terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994: p. 246). In other words, a social contract is an explicit agreement that outlines how team members should interact with one another. Such contracts help to instill a sense of commitment and trust among team members (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). They can also discourage behaviors that will hinder the team's ability to work together effectively. For student consulting teams, the social contract should discuss the team's performance expectations, values and norms, each member's roles and expectations, and how violations will be handled. Finally, for social contracts to be effective, they must be created collectively by the entire team. Once this process is complete, the team is ready to start working on the project in earnest.

ON-GOING SUPPORT

Once the students reach the performing stage of the team formation process, the preliminary work on the part of the instructor is complete. Nevertheless, the instructor should remain engaged with the teams and provide on-going support. While team autonomy can be a good thing in the workplace, it actually leads to lower performance in teams that are formed for a limited time and are assigned to produce a single output – as are student consulting project teams (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Grawitch, Munz, Elliott, & Mathis, 2003). In our experience, the problems with excessive autonomy of student consulting teams are compounded when teaching courses with students that are also working full-time (e.g., part-time MBAs). Continuously guiding the behavior of the student consulting teams is supported by the broader literature on teams and we found this to be effective with our own students. Teams that were the most likely to meet their goals in a timely manner were those that had managers who exerted control over the behaviors of the team and team members and provided constant feedback about their performance (Henderson & Lee, 1992; Pearce & Barkus, 2004).

Specifically, the Henderson and Lee (1992) study found that managers who continually guided the behaviors of their team by communicating the expected level of performance, developing procedures to guide the team's work, and defining the work assignment were more likely to have effective teams. Providing on-going support to teams also helps foster overall team collaboration. We have often evidenced that once tasks have been assigned to each team member, little additional collaboration occurs. Instead, each student (or pair of students) work in silos. They do not solicit input from team members or provide updates of their progress. Even worse, the team leader often does not know what these students are doing until they aggregate their work for the final report, at which point it is too late to make any significant changes.

Much of the support the students need from instructors in order to facilitate cooperation and collaboration between team members is facilitated by the course's structure. Two important strategies we use are to provide class time for team meetings and to require that team leaders submit bi-weekly status reports. Providing students with the opportunity to meet occasionally during class ensures that team members have the opportunity to communicate with each other face-to-face on a regular basis to provide updates and solicit feedback (Hansen, 2006). We typically allocate at least five 60-minute sessions over the course of the term for such meetings. Although instructors should try to spend time with each team during these team meetings, in our experience it is difficult to gain a solid understanding

of each team's progress and provide detailed assistance to each team during a brief meeting period. As such, we recommend requiring teams to submit a status report, consisting of the status of each task that must be completed and the following information on each task: brief description, person(s) responsible, current status, activities planned for the next period and issues that are affecting task completion. A sample status report template can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author. Status reports allow the instructor to get complete information on the progress that each team has made to-date, the tasks they still need to complete, and any problems they are facing. The process of completing these reports requires that team leaders communicate with the rest of their team. It also makes collaboration opportunities between team members readily apparent as everyone knows what everyone else is working on and students could directly ask each other for assistance (this could be facilitated by team leader). Moreover, such collaboration opportunities should be communicated by the team leader to the instructor so that the latter can ask the team to act on them if the team does not and get a follow-up on the implementation. Of course, for these status reports to help increase team collaboration, the instructor should review them and provide feedback in a timely manner.

We do realize that the proposed strategy of enhanced instructor engagement has both advantages and disadvantages. There are certainly some alternative methods seeking to minimize instructor interference into the process of self-management used by student consulting teams (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004). The rationale for such hands-off methods is that they may allow enhancing the benefits of experiential learning and learning by doing as students have plenty of opportunities for making mistakes and, consequently, learning from them. However, enhanced instructor engagement does not mean at all that the students would lose the benefits of experiential learning and learning by doing. Quite the opposite: by avoiding the pitfalls of poor organizing and ineffective leadership, student teams could free up more time for productive work, enhance collaboration while avoiding the destructive, dysfunctional aspects of conflict (Bolton, 1999).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Teaching classes replete with team projects can be challenging in many ways. Unfortunately, instructors may receive much of the blame for the problems that often arise in team projects (from both students and university administrators), but rarely get the credit they deserve when teams are effective. As such, it is very important for instructors to ensure student teams' success and continually guide them to optimize their performance. These challenges are exacerbated when student teams are conducting projects for external organizations and businesses as instructors need to satisfy various stakeholders: clients, controlling organizations (such as the Small Business Institute, departments and colleges) and most importantly, the students themselves. In this paper, we have discussed some typical problems arising in the student consulting process with regard to four subjects: (1) team formation; (2) leadership selection; (3) task allocation; and (4) on-going support by the instructor in the consulting process.

Based on a review of the literature as well as our own experience of teaching student consulting courses in the areas of strategy, entrepreneurship and human resource management, we recommend that instructors form student-guided teams. When prefaced by setting clear expectations for the consulting project and giving students the opportunity to informally get to know one another, student-guided teams are likely to lead to the formation of teams that are cohesive and sufficiently diverse in terms of backgrounds and skills. Such diversity of backgrounds and skills leading to diversity of perspectives could be helpful for maximizing the benefits of the consulting project. More diverse teams are more likely to favorably impress clients through the range of experience and expertise present in the team and may also help to develop a more trusting relationship if the client finds commonalties with at least some group members.

Of course, much of the team's chances for achieving success in performing their consulting assignment hinges on effective leadership. As such, we recommend clarifying the importance of choosing an effective and capable leader by having a frank conversation with the student team about the benefits of effective and the costs of ineffective leadership. To elevate the status of student leaders we proposed giving them a way of influencing the grades of the other team members by assessing each team member's level of contribution to the project. Students are much more likely to take the leadership selection process seriously when it can meaningfully affect their grade in the course. Although instructors often ask students to fill out peer evaluation forms, such practices are not always effective as students often prefer to praise everyone in the group out of concern that they could negatively affect others' grades. When the evaluation is done by the leaders, they are likely to approach the task more seriously – especially if the instructor solicits their input periodically during the semester. Furthermore, the instructor could ask the client to evaluate individual students' contributions and use this approach not only for the purposes of fair grading but also to get the client more involved in the process of consulting.

We have also discussed the importance of task delegation once teams are formed. Since consulting assignment represents a living experience, such task delegation could be changed as the instructor (and team leader) becomes more familiar with the students, their skills and capabilities as well as relationships, such as the ability to cooperate synergistically. The difference between consulting projects and more typical student projects is that the outcomes in the former are more meaningful – not only for the client, but also in terms of student learning. Since this is a creative process, the instructor needs to be concerned about maximizing the student group's ability to be creative. The instructor's ongoing support is needed for many reasons including that it could be difficult for group leader to reallocate the tasks to facilitate more creative work. The instructor is endowed with greater decision making power and authority and it could be easier for the instructor to explain to students why certain initial approaches may be changed to achieve better results.

To reiterate, while our recommendations are primarily intended to help increase the likelihood of creating cohesive and well-functioning teams and effective leadership, they also have another important benefit: to create more positive interaction and collaboration with the client. A healthy dose of client apprehension in the beginning of the student consulting process is understandable – they are opening up their business to a group of students that they played no part in selecting. Put another way, clients are often paying for something for which they do not know the value. Client uncertainty and disappointment are commonplace in consulting engagements (Ames, 1998). When meeting with the client for the first time, having a cohesive team supported by both a capable leader and an instructor who pledges to provide on-going support is likely to go a long way to alleviate client apprehension and concern.

The four subjects discussed in this paper certainly do not exhaust the number of themes that need to be addressed in discussing the interaction between the instructor, the client, the client's organization and student teams in the course of the student consulting process. However, we consider these themes as critical to success of student consulting and thus deserving special attention from scholars interested in enhancing the effective management of the student consulting process.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is based on analysis of the literature and the authors' experience in teaching courses involving student consulting. Throughout the paper, we have advocated greater instructor involvement in student consulting in order to help student teams maximize their potential while avoiding numerous pitfalls that could make them dysfunctional. Although we have some evidence that enhanced instructor engagement could be very helpful based on positive feedback from students, we have not tested

student satisfaction with the methods of teaching based on enhanced instructor engagement. We are hoping that this inquiry will spur additional research efforts comparing the benefits and shortcomings of hands-on vs. hands-off approaches toward instruction and their effect on student teams.

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