

Meeting Key Challenges in Delivering Client-Based Learning Programs within MBA Programs

EduSourced White Paper

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MBA programs are responding to criticism from industry and the media that their graduates are not able to effectively apply the essential skills needed to be successful. Business schools have taken different actions to address this criticism, including creating new core requirements and adding new elective courses. Of the different approaches being taken, one of the fast growing responses is to provide client-based learning opportunities for students.

This shift to delivering experiential learning opportunities is designed to give MBAs an opportunity to apply their classroom learning to current business challenges and thereby support their growth beyond “knowing to doing.” However, with this shift come a unique set of administrative challenges that business schools are just now beginning to systematically address.

Results from our recent research into MBA program best practices and a recent (January 2016) MBA Roundtable survey show that business schools face some key challenges when delivering a high quality client-based experience. These include:

- Sourcing projects of the right quantity and quality
- Retaining sponsor companies/organizations
- Managing the school brand
- Managing multiple stakeholders in a decentralized delivery system

We asked a diverse set of business schools to share their best practices for meeting these challenges. This paper aims to help business schools who seek to create, deliver, and improve their client-based learning efforts by sharing industry best practices and the ways that EduSourced can support schools in these efforts.

Sourcing Projects of the Right Quality and Quantity

It's the rare business school which reports it has enough projects of the right quality and quantity to meet their needs. Of the 92 schools responding to the recent MBA Roundtable survey, almost 30% listed securing and sustaining quality projects as their greatest challenge.

From our own work with schools we have found that those business schools that are most successful in sourcing enough and the right types of projects employ a product marketing and management approach to this challenge. These schools take the time to:

- Articulate the value of participating in client-based projects for potential sponsors
- Assemble a team to source projects
- Leverage their existing external relationships, including alumni, industry partners and recruiters, and their advisory boards, and
- Explore new channels to source opportunities

Articulating Value for Prospective Sponsors

The recent MBA Roundtable survey results show that less than 30% of schools charge organizations a fee to sponsor a student project. Yet schools regularly report difficulty in sourcing new projects.

We surmise that some business schools may not be factoring in the hidden participation costs for a potential sponsor. These hidden costs can represent a significant obstacle for an organization to overcome before they can sponsor a student project. Some of these hidden costs include the time and human resources needed to identify and scope a project, to mentor students, and to work closely with the students and school to ensure the deliverables are met.

Schools that are able to demonstrate to prospective sponsors that they understand these costs/obstacles and then clearly articulate the value for a prospective sponsor will be better able to secure projects, and the right kind of projects for their school. One school that has been successful in creating ways to help prospective sponsors overcome these obstacles is The Rady School at UC San Diego. All their prospective sponsors are provided essential information on the best ways to partner with The Rady School to meet their mutual needs.

“ We have, from the founding of the School (in 2001), had great business community support and interest... – but, not surprisingly, less knowledge/understanding of what makes a project a valuable educational experience for students (as opposed to useful for a company but really something that should be a paid internship). We early on developed a one-pager that describes the various ways that MBA (and now Master of Finance and MS Business Analytics) students conduct projects for academic credit and differentiates between projects that qualify as EL and interesting work that is an internship. That language is also reflected on our external website. ”

-JoAnne Starr, Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs

Another example is the University of Michigan-Ross School of Business, where they have also created marketing materials to support their project sourcing efforts. Their approach is to focus on providing summaries of previous projects, and includes testimonials from sponsors and students that prospective sponsors find very helpful.

“When our sponsors and students tell the story of their experience, it makes it much easier for a potential sponsor to understand why they should become involved...Communicating real outcomes and real learnings show that our program delivers great results for all involved. ”

-Gale Amyx, Managing Director, Office of Action-Based Learning

Assemble a team to source projects

We know that business schools pursue different models for determining who within the school has responsibility for sourcing projects. In the MBA Roundtable survey, schools reported that over 60% of projects were being sourced by tenured and non-tenured faculty as well as clinical (or practitioner) faculty and that approximately 30% of administrators are now involved in the sourcing process as well.

This seems to be an indicator that there is a shift happening on campus as schools work to leverage internal resources to source projects – perhaps in response to the growing pressure to create and deliver multiple experiential learning opportunities for students. Several schools shared as a best practice their involvement of multiple internal resources to source projects, including faculty, research centers, student and career services, and alumni/development.

“Everyone {inside the School} who interacts with companies and alumni has a one-pager: in Careers, Student Services, Alumni Affairs and External Relations, our various Centers. The faculty...knows that we have spent time developing language that works in interacting with companies. This means that we have a significant number of people who know that EL is a fundamental component of how we deliver graduate management education, can speak knowledgeably about how we do EL, can identify potential interested sponsors from their own interactions, and know where to refer potential project sponsors for further information.”

-JoAnne Starr, UC San Diego

Other schools take the approach of centralizing their outreach efforts within an administrative unit. For example, Harvard Business School has restructured their formal client-engagement project course administration so that it is managed under a single unit within the School, thereby allowing for greater coordination of company outreach efforts.

Leverage existing external relationships

For many business schools their alumni are the primary source of projects. There are many benefits to relying on alumni - they understand the School’s vision and learning objectives, and therefore are often most willing to offer support through hosting a student projects.

“Our alumni community is the first source for projects when we launch a new global immersion location. These alumni help identify projects within their own organizations as well as providing introductions to individuals and companies within their network who may be a good fit.”

- Doug Wakefield, Associate Director, and MBA Global Experience Office (GEO)

Some business schools have broadened their approach and source projects from additional existing corporate partnerships housed within other units of the school. At the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, projects are also sourced from their Career Services and Development offices.

Explore new channels to identify projects

Thinking beyond our existing external relationships in creative ways can prove to be a fruitful source of student projects. When The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania was seeking to source not-for-profit projects for the McNulty Leadership Program, they created a partnership with their local United Way. This partnership has led to many repeat projects and helped create a word-of-mouth pipeline for new sponsors.

Retaining Sponsor Companies

Retaining sponsor companies can be a complex and time consuming challenge for business schools. Yet without the ability to retain at least some portion of existing project sponsors schools face the challenge of sourcing significant numbers of new sponsors on an ongoing basis. This can be especially challenging and often forces faculty and others to take time away from their primary responsibilities to focus on generating new projects.

Overwhelmingly, schools report that the best way to retain a company sponsor is to achieve great value for the sponsor.

So what are business schools doing to ensure their sponsors get a great result? Four key elements seem to be central to a school's ability to retain quality project sponsors.

1. **Ensure the project is a great "fit."** This means evaluating potential projects to determine if they are a fit for your learning goals. For example, at The Raymond A. Mason School of Business at the College of William and Mary, emphasis is placed on defining the learning experience with a potential client company as the priority for determining if it is a high quality project. And at other schools and internal project ranking system is used:
 - a. The University of San Francisco School of Management employs an application process to filter projects that students and faculty then rank for fit.
 - b. The University of Michigan Ross School of Business applies a two-pronged approach to evaluate project fit. To begin, a faculty advisory committee reviews all potential projects and selects those they deem to be the best learning opportunities. Students are then given an opportunity to select up to 15 projects (out of a pool of approximately 115 projects) while the teaching faculty bid on the same set of projects. Matching is then conducted accordingly to these results

2. **Set clear objectives and reasonable expectations** with the sponsor on all aspects of the project, including the purpose of the student learning objectives.
 - a. For many schools this means that a faculty member owns the oversight of the project, including providing student coaching, to ensure that the sponsor's expectations are met, or if they need to be adjusted are done so in a professional way

- b. At the University of Wisconsin School of Business, clear milestones are established for each project and students are held accountable for each milestone.
 - c. In addition, to ensure that students are able to meet expectations and milestones it is important that students have access to resources including the necessary infrastructure to be successful
3. **Communicate clearly and often throughout the entire process** of cultivation to project completion.
- a. The University of Michigan Ross School of Business provides every project sponsor with a sponsor handbook to help them navigate their project engagement with the School
4. **Include the sponsor in the project evaluation process.** When business schools view their project sponsors as partners in the learning process they will achieve their greatest result in retaining those sponsors. This approach can also yield additional benefits for the school and its students.
- a. The Wisconsin School of Business has found that “...companies (can) get a close look at how students perform and what they’re capable of as well as giving students an “inside look” at what it might be like to work at a particular company.”
- Suzanne Dove, Assistant Dean for Academic Innovations

Managing the School brand

We believe that actively managing a School’s brand is an essential element when administering client-based projects. Unfortunately for those schools who do not anticipate brand-related issues it can take only one or two projects going awry for their reputation/brand to suffer.

For most of the business schools contributing to this paper the benefits of managing their brand are clear.

Several different approaches to handling this effectively were shared, ranging from closely managing the project matching process, to contracting with students, to linking the projects to capstone courses.

“The project selection process for the students and faculty...is one of the key ways we manage our brand. Having highly engaged students and faculty sets a project up for success. We also work to ensure the students have the requisite experience, business skills and language capabilities the sponsors request...Having a team with the right backgrounds and tools to address a company’s business issue shows that Ross MBAs will truly bring value through their project and that they could be a good fit for the company as a full-time hire.”

- Gale Amyx, University of Michigan

And Thomas Maier, Associate Professor at the University of San Francisco states:

“We make sure quality of work and student engagements are a top priority. That means screening students...360-degree feedback looping between the students, clients, and faculty all tied to overarching business school learning outcomes.”

At UC San Diego, projects are linked to their MBA Capstone experience which focuses on innovation to market and is directly linked to the School’s overall positioning.

Harvard Business School requires all Global Partners and students to sign a standard set of agreement documents that include, among other things, guidance and restrictions on how their project engagement with HBS and our students can (or cannot) be messaged more broadly.

And at The Wharton School, Anne M. Greenhalgh, Adjunct Professor of Management and Deputy Director McNulty Leadership Program shares:

“Students clearly present themselves as students of The Wharton School and The University of Pennsylvania; while also respecting the sponsor’s brand through the use of their letterhead and other branded materials while on the project. It is made clear that the sponsor and The School are partners but not co-brands.”

Managing multiple stakeholders in a decentralized delivery system

It’s becoming more common for multiple stakeholders within the business school to be involved in delivering a client-based learning experience. These stakeholders include faculty with deep knowledge about their discipline, the students, and a specific industry sector, faculty and administrators with solid corporate connections; and faculty and/or staff who create and report on well-defined metrics and measurements. Each of these stakeholders has a set of needs that can present challenges when asked to work together seamlessly. And business schools that offer multiple project courses within their degree program(s) have an additional level of complexity to manage when delivering quality experiences for sponsors and students.

The best practices we have uncovered for addressing these challenges include:

- Define roles and role expectations for each member of the team
- Create reporting systems to track sponsors and how well their projects have gone
- Assign a “champion” for each sponsor
- Set and communicate milestones and metrics
- Hold regular update meetings with stakeholders to evaluate and calibrate project progress
- Share course/project outcomes, especially with those who have responsibility for sourcing projects, to ensure new projects meet the high standards set during previous projects

Summary

Business schools are discovering the many benefits of offering client-based projects: deeper student learning and better prepared alumni, increased MBA student satisfaction and improved ties between the business school and industry. They are also discovering that providing a high-quality and sustainable client-based experience for students and sponsors is a resource intensive endeavor. Key take-aways included in this paper are:

- Provide consistent messaging to prospective and existing sponsors, ensuring that expectations are aligned with student needs and abilities, beginning with how your program is presented to potential sponsors through the entire project delivery process
- Structure regular check-ins with sponsors and internal stakeholders
- Organize sponsor and project records in a central location to support future project sourcing efforts
- Review each project cycle upon completion to determine what improvements can be made going forward

By undertaking some of the actions shared in this paper we believe that business schools can improve their client-based offerings and that it will result in the best possible experience for all stakeholders – internal and external to the School.

About EduSourced:

EduSourced addresses the two primary needs client-based experiential learning with the EL – MS software platform and Gateway, a project sourcing service.

The **EduSourced EL – MS platform** is the leading software for managing and organizing client-based learning programs. Our platform enables business schools to centralize all project information and collaboration in one place, monitor project progress and team dynamics, measure impact on clients and students and tell your program's story with reporting and metrics. Learn more [here](#).

An additional resource for business schools seeking to deepen their ties to industry with a goal of increasing the number and quality of experiential-based projects is **Gateway**, a new service being provided that connects participating schools with potential project sponsors. Learn more [here](#).

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