

STUDENT PROJECTS WITHIN THEIR OWN COMPANIES

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Abstract

The value of experiential learning is much heralded in many, if not all corners of academia. Because business is an applied discipline, the development of class assignments and projects that mirror what students will be doing in their post collegiate careers is, perhaps, even more compelling than in more theoretical academic domains. Additionally, many students today are working as they go to school. In fact, in some graduate business programs, nearly all of the students are working full time. The experiences that these students are having in their jobs and careers are a naturally occurring form of experiential learning. Business faculty often find that these on-the-job experiences, when shared within the classroom, can provide a rich dimension to the learning of all students.

The focus of this session is on situations where, rather than bringing work-related experiences into the classroom, students take schooling based learning and assignments for application into their workplaces. How does this work? How does an educator best structure it? What are its advantages versus projects for organizations with which the student has no connection? What are some of the kinds of assignments that lend themselves to being successfully applied by a student at work? What kinds of assignments may not work as well? What dangers or pitfalls should be considered that could derail the success of assignments carried out within the student's workplace?

We will first address projects within the context of a student internship program. The presenters' college has an internship/practicum program, participation in which is required of every undergraduate student. If the student chooses the internship alternative, which most students do, the student finds a company or organization that is willing to bring the student on for a semester as either a paid or unpaid intern. Some students who are working a part- or full-time job are able to arrange to do an internship at their own place of employment. However, the internship coordinators are very cautious with this election. It is important to the program that the student is not simply doing what he or she would have been doing anyway and getting credit for it. Rather the student is required to develop, with the aid of supervisors at work and our institution's internship coordinators, a special project within the workplace that goes beyond the regular scope of the student's duties. We will discuss the incidence of students doing

internships at their own workplace and internship coordinators determine whether a proposed on-the-job internship is appropriate and sufficient to meet the objectives of the internship requirement. We will also discuss the particular advantages and disadvantages of doing an internship at the students' own place of employment and the overall success of internships at one's own job to internships for other organizations.

We will then address MBA class student projects that may be carried out on behalf the student's employer or within the context of the student's employment. At our college, the MBA program is an evening program, and nearly all of the students are working full time. As a business school, we have considered the strategic choice of developing more of a project-based learning approach. One suggestion for structuring this is to have them carry out projects from their own workplaces. While this is still in the development stages, one of the presenters will address a class assignment where students are required to do qualitative research on customers, effectively "spending a day in the life of the customer." The focus of the research is on observing and interviewing customers to discover gaps in expectations versus delivery. Data will be presented that addresses, over several semesters, how many of the students chose to research customers of their own organizations versus choosing to research customers of another, generally retail, organization. We will also present findings from MBA students with regard to how they chose the customers they would research, whether customers of their own organizations or not. In general, the MBA students do not choose to study their own customers, although one might think that the knowledge that could be gained from study of one's own customers might have benefits to them in their careers. Periodically, however, students do research their own companies' customers and many of them are excited by the prospect of being able to share their findings with superiors within the organization.

The session will conclude by considering how to "sell" students on the value of taking their learning into their current workplaces during the course of their actual studies, rather than waiting to graduate before applying what they are learning. We will focus on what kinds of assurances will be helpful to assuage student fears with regard to doing school projects at their own places of employment. Also, those kinds of marketing-related projects that lend themselves best to application in the workplace will be addressed, as well as what steps to take to make the results of these projects more beneficial for both employer and student/employee.