

A LOOK AT THE PEDAGOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PROJECT-BASED MBA AND THE TRADITIONAL MBA

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ABSTRACT

This special session examines the pedagogy of a project-based MBA program design as compared to that of a traditional MBA program, looking specifically at the ability of each to foster the multidisciplinary skills needed to be successful in today's business world. In traditional programs, students are primarily taught in a lecture/classroom format. They then demonstrate understanding of concepts on exams or papers that are primarily theoretical in nature. In contrast, project-based programs focus on students' demonstration of the ability to apply concepts in real-world situations. To facilitate this, a project-based MBA faculty member's role shifts from professor to coach. The chart to the right highlights some of the basic differences between project-based and traditional pedagogies.

Crucial to this session's discussion are the three central tenets that form the foundation of project-based programs: no grades, no classes and no tests. At first blush these might seem antithetical to what is normally thought of as "higher education." Grades and tests are ordinarily thought to be required for a program to be considered rigorous. Looking more closely at each, however, we find solid pedagogical reasons why they do not make sense for a project-based program. Further, we find that a project-based program can be rigorous without them.

A basic question that must be asked about grades is "what do they mean?" Does a "C" in a course mean that the student doesn't understand very well, but enough to pass? A project-based program replaces traditional grades with one of the following: "Exceeds," "Meets," or "Does Not Meet." To receive a "Meets," a student must show mastery of the competencies associated with the project. However, a student does not need to achieve this evaluation on first attempt; rather, the faculty coach continues to work with the student until mastery is achieved. Tests can be very limiting in their ability to evaluate the high level of learning that students will need to

succeed as executives. Tests tend to measure a student's knowledge at a point in time. Further, tests ordinarily measure how well a student remembers, rather than the ability to apply concepts. Finally, tests are generally one-off propositions, meaning that the test grade will be permanent. Since project-based programs require the student to demonstrate mastery across multiple contexts and through multiple projects, tests cannot be expected to measure at the level necessary to show mastery.

Project-Based Programs	Traditional Programs
The project-based program is based on skills and abilities called "competencies." A student must master each before he/she graduates.	Courses are based on learning goals, which may or may not be measured.
A student finishes with the program when he/she has finished the projects and demonstrated mastery of business skills.	A student is done when he/she has finished all the courses.
Does not require the student to relearn skills and topics he/she has already mastered.	Students must take all the courses regardless of expertise or background.
The student can work where and when they please at a speed that is integrated into their life goals.	The student is required to go to campus when courses are scheduled, regardless of other commitments.
Projects are interdisciplinary	Classes are taken one subject at a time.
Students work one-on-one with a project coach.	A professor usually teaches to an entire class.
Focus is placed specifically on the communications skills needed to be successful: managing projects, leading teams, presenting, writing, negotiating, facilitating, etc.	In some courses, there are group projects and presentations, but techniques are rarely taught.