MBA Curriculum: The Role of an Introductory "Toolkit" Course

Charles M. Carson
Professor, Brock School of Business
Steven T. Jones
Professor, Brock School of Business
Jeffrey W. Dance
Instructor, Brock School of Business
James H. Finch
Professor, Brock School of Business
Betsy B. Holloway
Professor, Brock School of Business
James P. Reburn
Professor, Brock School of Business
William H. Belski
Associate Professor, Brock School of Business

all of
Samford University
Birmingham, Alabama

ABSTRACT

Graduate business students enter MBA programs intent on completing their degrees to open new professional opportunities and enhance their prospective career earnings potential. Because of the diversity of backgrounds new students bring into their MBA programs, large variations exist among their academic and professional backgrounds. Curriculums address the disparity between undergraduate business majors and students with other undergraduate degrees by teaching foundation classes designed to level the respective skill sets. Typically, these classes focus on specific technical skills such as accounting and finance, or business perspectives such as economic and managerial principles. Broader, more general skills needed to maximize the core curriculum experience are presumed or ignored. This article details one school's project to strengthen the MBA experience by developing a "toolkit" class for incoming MBA students. The following pages describe the changes that were implemented within Samford University's Brock School of Business program, focusing specifically on the introduction of a new course to the MBA curriculum: BUSA 505 Managerial Communications and Analysis, a.k.a. the "Toolkit" Course.

BACKGROUND

For several years the Brock School of Business (BSOB) faculty working on the Graduate Education Process Committee (GEPC) examined the strategic positioning of the BSOB's Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program. The result of the committee's work was a set of recommendations for ways to improve the MBA program. The committee's proposals were of great value to the school, but administrative instability due to the departure and search for a new dean cast uncertainty over the implementation of the committee's proposals.

Upon the search conclusion and implementation of a new school administrative team, work began with the new chair of GEPC on ways to improve the MBA program. With the work of GEPC as a foundation and Assurance of Learning (AOL) data indicating room for improvement in written communication and data analysis, one area that had been highlighted for discussion was how the Brock School would handle students who needed coursework and skills to get them "up to speed" before they entered the core courses in the program.

Previously, the School offered six "Foundations" level courses (Accounting, Statistics, Economics, Finance, Management, and Marketing). These courses were designed for students who either did not have an undergraduate degree in a Business discipline or who had not performed well enough in a given subject area as an undergraduate Business major to exempt out of the foundation course. With more students coming to the School with undergraduate Business degrees enrollment in these Foundations courses was trending down. Additionally, scheduling these courses pulled valuable course loads and course preparations from full time faculty. The decision was made to attempt to reduce the number of "Foundations" courses offered and required in the MBA program as well as provide for creative ways for students to exempt out of any remaining "Foundations" classes.

A thorough but informal discussion with each department chair and faculty member teaching within the MBA core revealed that the Foundations of Statistics was a course that could be a good candidate for alternative delivery, streamlining into an existing course, or elimination. Ultimately, GEPC recommended streamlining the statistical material into a new combined "Foundations of Economics and Statistics" course.

Discussions with faculty in the Department of Entrepreneurship, Management, and Marketing resulted in both of the Foundations of Management and Marketing courses being removed from the curriculum. The plan was for key concepts from these classes to be disseminated and taught in a new course in the MBA Curriculum: BUSA 505 Managerial Communications and Analysis.

With the total number of "Foundations" courses reduced from six to three, GEPC began to look at new ways to get students into the MBA core quicker. The School faculty voted to allow students to exempt out of any of the three remaining "Foundations" courses (Accounting, Finance, and Economics/Statistics) if they held a regionally accredited undergraduate degree in Business. Additionally, students could exempt out of the Foundations courses if they successfully completed individual undergraduate Business courses in Accounting, Finance, and Economics with a minimum grade of C- on any given course. Alternatively, students without the equivalent courses could choose a self-study route that led to them taking the final exam of the respective Foundations course. Scoring a 70 or greater on that final exam would allow the student to exempt a given foundation course and move into the core curriculum.

In adding Managerial Communications and Analysis (BUSA 505) as a required course for all enrolled students the total MBA increased by three additional credit hours. The faculty also decided that a course that had been an MBA elective, Managing Corporate Integrity, should now be included in the MBA Core to better match with the University's Christian Mission. This change increased the total required hours to complete the MBA from 30 to 36 hours. There were some concerns that an increase in credit hours (and thus cost) would damage the demand for the Brock School MBA. GEPC and the Faculty argued that a better MBA would be the result and that the market would recognize the improved quality of the MBA as compared to the competition.

With the structural framework in place for the new MBA program, efforts turned to developing a new and inventive course, Managerial Communications and Analysis. This course was designed to be taken in the first semester of enrollment, and would provide a set of skills needed for optimal success as students matriculated through the Brock School's MBA program.

MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATIONS AND ANALYSIS—THE TOOLKIT COURSE

In the Brock School's standard Fall and Spring semester students attend a class for a total of 30 contact hours. Classes meet two hours a night for one night a week over a 15 week semester. The next challenge was to determine how to divide up and allocate those 30 hours of seat time given the desire to have multiple skills and concepts taught to the students while preparing them for the rigor of their upcoming core MBA courses.

In the early course development process, School administration worked closely with GEPC and the faculty at large to develop a desired set of skills that should be included in the Toolkit Course. The elimination of foundational courses in Management and Marketing made concepts from those disciplines a priority for the toolkit course. Additionally, faculty determined desired skills to be covered included oral and written communication, computer spreadsheet software, and general instruction on graduate expectations for case analysis and presentation. After negotiating time allotments for each topic, School administration sent out an email soliciting faculty participation and involvement in the delivery of the respective "modules" within the course. Faculty were offered compensation in line with hourly rates for training and consulting rather than have any portion of this class count as part of their assigned teaching load. All faculty members teaching within the MBA program were invited to attend the first night of class to begin the process of forging relationships and opening the channels of communication with the incoming class of students. The final schedule included 4 hours of written communications, 2 hours of oral communications and presentation skills, 4 hours of case analysis, 4 hours of instruction in Microsoft Excel, and 6 hours each of management and marketing foundational concepts.

The course syllabus included grading elements for two content related exams (Management and Marketing concepts), class participation (based on peer evaluation), student use of Excel in their case analysis project and the final written case analysis. The students were divided into teams to work on their case analyses and each team member was instructed to evaluate the participation of their team members. The students analyzed a case written explicitly for this course by an experienced healthcare consultant. The case analysis, which was used as the basis of the "final exam" for the course, combined elements of management and marketing along with spreadsheet applications for data analysis. Additionally, students were required to present the case in class before a panel of participating faculty members and turn in a written case analysis. The project is a multipart assessment of how well students have grasped the skills and concepts of the class.

In additional to the curriculum improvement and enhanced student success within the program, the Toolkit class offers enhanced credit hour production. Samford offers a three week mini-term during January. In the past, limited MBA courses had been offered in this semester but the Toolkit course seemed well suited for this session and offering the course allowed students to begin taking a full slate of core or elective classes in the Spring semester which followed. Subsequent experience has shown the class to be easily adaptable to more concise summer terms as well. The following sections discuss each of the modules offered in the Toolkit course.

CASE ANALYSIS

A significant number of the core courses in many MBA programs employ case analysis as either a primary or a secondary learning tool. Depending on the course, students may be expected to analyze cases or mini-cases as part of class discussions, individual or team writing assignments, individual or team presentations, and/or exam questions. Because cases form such an important part of both the learning experience and the grading process, two separate two-hour class meetings of the Toolkit course were devoted to introducing students to the case method and how it will be utilized in subsequent courses within the program.

In the initial course iteration, faculty members decided to begin the first session regarding case analyses with a discussion of two things that the students should not expect to learn from the session. First, some students enter MBA programs thinking of their classes as simply the fifth and sixth year of college. Faculty felt it was quite important to make sure that the students knew that this particular session was not going to be devoted to providing them with a checklist they could follow, which would give them a guaranteed "A" on a case analysis.

Second, many incoming MBA students have no way of knowing that the term "case analysis" does not mean the same thing to every professor. Purists might describe a case analysis as presenting students with a situation and telling them, in essence, "Go to it." At the other extreme, some cases are actually designed as directed problems; there are various shades in between those two extremes. So, in addition to explaining to students that there was no checklist for earning a guaranteed "A" on a case analysis, it was critical to make clear from the start that there also is no single template for a "standard" case analysis.

With those key points established, the next step was to make the students aware of three key learning objectives of the ensuing discussion: how studying cases can benefit their education, questions they should ask themselves when they read a case, and how to approach the preparation of a case analysis.

An initial concern was that even with a "sample case analysis" coming during the second two-hour session (see "Purinex Inc." in Case Studies in Finance: Managing for Corporate Value Creation, Sixth Edition; by Robert F. Bruner, Kenneth M. Eades, and Michael J. Schill; McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2010), it would send mixed signals to use a lecture-only format in an entire two-hour session regarding something as participatory as case analysis. Further, it also seemed useful to utilize student input as a means of creating student buy-in to the ideas being presented.

Thus, after the introductory comments outlined above, the instructor distributed a handout in which students were asked what skills they expected to develop and/or improve as a result of performing case analyses as part of their graduate education. Students were told up front that the instructor for this session, along with the course coordinator, would evaluate their written answers and that additional course credit could be earned for outstanding answers.

After the students had written their comments and handed them in, the instructor then opened up the floor for discussion, modeling the manner an instructor might do in asking open-ended questions to set the stage for discussion of a particular case. After allowing a reasonable amount of time for this discussion, the instructor then went through prepared comments regarding the topic, integrating earlier student comments where possible.

The instructor followed a similar pattern for the topic of what questions a student should ask in reading a case, and again for the topic of what a good “plan of attack” would be for actually writing up a case analysis. For each of these questions, the forms on which students were to provide their initial written reactions made clear that they were being asked how to approach cases in general, regardless of the particulars of a given case.

The aforementioned discussions combined were designed to take all of the first two-hour class session, and a modest portion of the second. At the time of the first session (i.e., one week prior to the second session), the students were also provided with an example of the type of case that they might be requested to analyze in a future course. Students were also provided with a set of questions designed to prompt their thinking on various issues in the case. Most of the second session was spent discussing the assigned case, simulating as closely as possible the way an instructor might conduct such a discussion in a core class.

There was one aspect stressed at the time the case was distributed, but which in hindsight merited additional emphasis. In order to make sure that the students’ attention is where it should be on this “trial case,” experience shows it is important to stress there are no expectations regarding the ability of the students to carry out an actual graded analysis of the case in question. Clearly, many of the students in this course will not have been exposed to any of the material that someone in a core course would be familiar with by the time a case analysis of this nature was conducted.

Rather, the key is to put the students in a position of fighting their way through a case. Indeed, during the actual case discussion the following week, the instructor pointed out that many case analyses will end up sending the students scurrying for various forms of reference materials, and that this is perfectly normal. However, in subsequent iterations of the course more attention has been paid to stressing this idea before the fact, as well as after.

WRITTEN AND PRESENTATION SKILLS

Early in the semester students were provided guidance on accepted styles for academic writing and research. The Brock School collectively has a preferred citation format (APA) to which the students were oriented. They engaged in writing activities and exercises and were informed about the importance of attribution and citation of sources in academic writing.

The presentation skills section of the class focused on effective public speaking, for both monologues (speeches) and group presentations. You Tube video examples were presented of both good and poor public speaking. Points of emphasis included enunciation, clarity, pacing, pauses and transitions, and voice inflection. The final speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, “I Have Been to the Mountain Top,” was used to highlight passion, pacing, pausing and voice inflection. Then Presidential candidate Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign debate moment was used to illustrate body language, personalization of message, and empathetic connection with the audience. The videos were shown in class and discussed. Students responded very positively to the King video, stating that his passion and personal conviction motivated them to buy into the message and created desire to join his efforts to fight for equal rights. Reaction to the Clinton video was decidedly mixed; some students felt like his decision to leave the podium and walk out to the edge of the stage to address the individual who raised the question was very effective in personalizing the message, while others stated that his (now known) propensity for less than full truthfulness made him unbelievable. An instructional take-away was that using political figures as classroom examples proved polarizing and detracted from the emphasis on public speaking skills.

The class also focused on the use of visual aids in presentations, primarily PowerPoint slides. Again, You Tube videos were shown on how to use Power Point effectively and to illustrate some of the more egregious mistakes oft-repeated. Points of emphasis included font size and readability, color schemes and contrasts between text and backgrounds, single slide information overload, readability and effectiveness of graphs, minimization or avoidance of animation, and pictures and use of clip art. Students were cautioned against reading slide content to the audience, and class members shared their ideas for avoiding this mistake. The general consensus that emerged from class discussion was that less is more, both in individual slide content and regarding the total number of slides comprising the presentation. A take-away from this portion of the class was the use of roadside billboards to highlight effective and ineffective slides. The average motorist has less than 3 seconds to digest a billboard message, and this analogy was used effectively for Power Point slides as well.

Finally, the class concluded with a short discussion on the logistics of group presentations, particularly regarding case studies. Emphasis was noted on effecting smooth transitions from one presenter to another, avoiding redundancy, and discussing where and how many presenters should be standing during the presentation. There was some debate on whether non-presenting members of the group should be standing or sitting, with a consensus they should be standing off to the side to avoid distracting up and down movements as speakers transitioned. While no one standard of professional presentation practice was identified, emphasis was placed on practicing presentation and using both audio and video to record and critique practice presentations.

MARKETING CONCEPTS

The three-week marketing component of the course aimed to familiarize students with the fundamentals of marketing. Due to clear downward trends in the average age and experience of new MBA students within this program, the marketing component was structured with the assumption that the students may not have had any formal business training or work experience.

Emphasis was placed on key marketing principals and an overview of the marketing function in the context of organizational strategy. Major topics covered included market planning, management of the marketing mix, segmentation, marketing research, market positioning, and branding.

The marketing component incorporated four chapters of material from a popular marketing management textbook appropriate for graduate and executive education. In addition, the students were expected to read assigned articles from the popular press including the school provided *Wall Street Journal* which were discussed in class meetings. An in-class test was provided at the end of the component to assess the students' understanding of the marketing content covered.

There were several challenges associated with the marketing component of the course. First, it was difficult to provide a thorough overview of a major functional area of business in only 6 class hours. Second, there was vast variability with respect to the previous business education and work experience of the students enrolled in the course. Further, it was difficult to position the marketing material in the context of the other course topics and instructors; uneven communication among different module instructors made it difficult to know exactly what content had been previously presented, and how the marketing material could best be presented in the context of the full course content. Finally, given the uncertainty just noted, it was challenging to present the marketing material in a manner that would best inform the business strategy case to be completed at the completion of the course.

In subsequent course offerings, care was taken to more fully understand the entire course content and to more thoroughly address the key marketing issues relevant to the assigned business strategy case.

MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

In advance of the Management section students were provided several outside readings. These were primarily focused on organizational structure concepts; especially that of the matrix organization.

In lieu of a textbook, the instructor provided an electronic copy of a PowerPoint presentation leading the class through the historical management periods and the significant leaders within each. Also each lesson stressed competitive advantage, value chain, and the four functions of management (planning, organizing, leading, and controlling).

Following the organizational structure lecture (Theories X, Y, Z, Matrix and Generational Differences to Motivation, etc.) the instructor conducted one in-class assignment consisting of four mini-case studies divided among the group. The students were asked to use sticky notes to develop an organizational structure based on their assigned case; they developed an organizational chart with titles and functions which was arranged on the class wallboard. The issues mirrored many of those found in the assigned course case. Each group had to explain the rationale for their organization structure and whether or not their structure was a matrix. This practical approach helped them to understand how to work together, quickly evaluate a case, and set them up for the coming assigned course case.

From a pedagogical perspective the lectures were designed to focus the class on many of the salient points within the assigned course case, however, the instructor specifically tried not to give leading answers. In a more consultative approach, the instructor stressed the need to consider all aspects of the case and look for clues that would fit within the context of the lectures and the case.

Much like the marketing module, time became a central roadblock to the effective introduction and application of the salient management topics. In an attempt to secure more "in class" time in subsequent course offerings the instructor plans to use a take home test to reserve class time for more discussion and instruction.

There were also concerns that the management portion of the course was placed too late in the semester and that students would have benefitted from getting both conceptual / topics based modules (management and marketing) earlier in the semester and more of the "tools" later in the semester. As with the marketing module, current events are viewed as a must for effective discussion going forward and will be a part of ongoing class participation for each session.

SPREADSHEET SKILLS

One of the key challenges of this skill module was to recognize that MBA students come to an MBA program with differing levels of knowledge and experience with respect to using Microsoft Excel. This acknowledgement reassured students that there would be reasonable expectations for all students. This tactic may have resulted in some students finding the material covered to be too elementary; however, the module was built to provide even the "power-users" with a few tips or some new ways to do things using Excel. A unique feature of Excel is the fact that there are different ways to accomplish similar tasks; encouraging students to share with the class if they had a "better way" turned out to be a nice class participation technique.

The learning objectives for the Excel module of the Toolkit course were:

- Understand common uses for Excel
- Familiarize students with basic Excel features
- Introduce keyboard shortcuts for efficient usage
- Introduce some Excel functions that will be used in subsequent MBA coursework
- Learn how to import data into Excel
- Introduce Excel macros

The Excel Toolkit component of the course was taught in a computer lab classroom using PowerPoint. Students were provided with an electronic copy of the PowerPoint presentation along with an Excel workbook for use during two two-hour class sessions. The Excel workbook consisted of 17 worksheets with datasets used to illustrate a particular Excel feature. Also included on each Excel sheet was an embedded Power Point slide with applicable guidance for each topic. During discussion of a specific Excel feature, students were encouraged to practice the feature being illustrated.

The first several topics were very basic and included topics such as: entering data, worksheet navigation, selecting cells/rows/columns, copy and paste, insert, auto fill, formulas, cell references, renaming/moving sheets, freezing panes, format painter, printing, and worksheet protection. Again, students had the opportunity to practice various commands and procedures during class time.

Next, more programming oriented topics such as: VLookup, AutoSum Tool, Date and Time functions, text functions, If Statements, error trapping, freezing panes, filtering, sorting, and charts were covered. Students were given a problem and then the instructor demonstrated how the problem could be solved using Excel as a tool.

Next, basic functions were briefly covered. These functions included: sum, count, large, min, max, and subtotal. Similarly, time value of money functions such as FV, PV, PMT, IRR, and NPV were demonstrated. It was important to keep in mind that the purpose of the class was not to teach students about the underlying principles of the functions, but merely to show them the proper syntax and the availability of some Excel features.

The finance faculty requested the Time Value of Money topic coverage, as well as specifics regarding data entry and calculation versus financial calculators. It proved to be a challenge to stay on task by introducing the Excel topics and leaving the subject matter for subsequent MBA coursework.

The next objective of the module was to introduce students to more powerful Excel features such as "What if Analysis" including Data Tables, Goal Seek, Solver, and Scenario Manager. Short pre-constructed examples with business applications were used. For example, the worksheet demonstrating Goal Seek contained a contribution approach income statement. Students used goal seek to determine the number of units that must be sold to break-even. Various ways to import data and how to record macros as a means to speed up one's work where repetitive actions are often required were briefly demonstrated.

The remaining time was used to practice Excel skills within the context of a very large dataset. The Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) provided by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data set was used for this purpose. This database contains extensive details about every traffic fatality in the U.S. The FARS database provides a very large dataset that student can use to practice their worksheet navigation skills. Students quickly realize that common mouse usage of pointing and clicking is not always the most efficient way to select ranges of data. Finally, the use of this database is very practical for a first MBA course since it contains data that is familiar to students and does not require explanation of business concepts to practice data manipulation skills. Having this practice time allotted to the end of the class allows for some flexibility in terms of classroom time management.

The objective of the Excel Toolkit component is for students to at minimum understand the basics of using Excel, appreciate the capabilities of Excel, and have confidence in their ability to use Excel in their MBA coursework as well as on the job.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper highlights one school's attempt to both strengthen and improve its MBA curriculum. One specific course, Managerial Communications and Analysis, serves as a "Toolkit" course for entering MBA students to gain skills and concepts that will prepare them for success during their MBA program of study. This unique pedagogical approach offers both opportunities and challenges to administration, faculty, and students. Following the initial course offering, subsequent iterations of the class have produced mixed results, with students in smaller enrollment classes providing much more favorable feedback than students in larger classes.

Faculty and administration plans to review all aspects of the course following the first year of implementation and make any necessary changes going forward. A more accurate assessment of the success of this course will occur as students matriculate through the entire MBA program over the typical two to three years and provide both formal and informal feedback to individual faculty members and during graduate student exit interviews.

All MBA programs face challenges associated with varied levels of age, professional experience and skill sets of incoming students. While faculty members attempt to overcome these challenges, students often express displeasure with the extra time and costs associated with foundation, or leveling, course requirements. It is hoped that this experience in designing a “Toolkit” class for all incoming MBA students will assist other programs in their graduate curriculum modification and review process.