Implementing a "SWIF" Program in an Undergraduate Strategy Course: Processes, Results and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

As faculty charged with the continued development and delivery of our college's capstone strategy course, we implemented a student-written, faculty-facilitated (SWIF) case project into the curriculum beginning in the spring semester of 2011. Our objective was to integrate three main areas of our professional lives: teaching (i.e. student learning), academic scholarship (i.e. publishing), and community involvement (a component of professional service). In this paper we address the challenges associated with finding case sites and identifying case foci, and then discuss a number of specific issues related to project description, assignment instructions, and deliverables. We conclude by describing several ways in which are currently attempting to close the gap between the promise and the reality of a SWIF case program.

INTRODUCTION

Business schools in institutions of higher learning often employ a mix of three pedagogical approaches: lecture, small group discussion and experiential learning, and a "case" approach. At the University of Texas at Tyler College of Business and Technology (CBT), the capstone course for the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree has traditionally relied on a mix of traditional lecture and case analysis. The case component of the course is intended to establish a learning environment in which students can integrate accumulated competencies and knowledge in a simulated experiential setting. The capstone strategy course is required of all BBA candidates majoring in accounting, finance, management or marketing.

As faculty charged with the continued development and delivery of CBT capstone strategy course, we made the decision to integrate a student-written, faculty-facilitated (SWIF) case project into the curriculum beginning in the spring semester of 2011. We were motivated by the possibility that a properly-implemented SWIF case program would allow us to integrate and cross-fertilize three main areas of our professional lives: teaching (i.e. student learning), academic scholarship (i.e. publishing), and community involvement (as a component of professional service). We were optimistic that a SWIF program would bring together faculty, students, and practitioners in a way that would create value for everyone involved (Ross, Zufan & Rosenbloom, 2008).

A SWIF program appeared to have the potential to bring these different job demands into mutually-beneficial contact by creating a situation in which students would engage in action learning in a host business and the work product from that interaction would benefit the students (by giving them valuable experience in a real-world business setting), the business (by giving them access to student recommendations), and faculty (by jumpstarting the academic case-writing process

that would culminate in published cases based on student work in peer-reviewed case journals).

Although we hoped to be able leverage the SWIF case approach enhance our ongoing scholarly efforts and to contribute positively to our ability to provide meaning community service, we made the conscious decision to focus first on the its direct impact on student learning. Paul Swiercz, a leading proponent of the SWIF case model, emphasizes the action learning aspect of the SWIF model as follows:

> Among educators, traditional case teaching has unquestionable value, but it also has a major limitation: traditional case methods limit the student to the role of analyst. In contrast, SWIF converts case teaching into an active learning experience by requiring students to assume a variety of new roles such as researcher, petitioner, interviewer, negotiator, writer, editor, team-member, etc. This approach allows students to move from passive case analyst to active case developer (2003, p. 1).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is structured as follows. We provide some background information on businesses cases and then summarize the SWIF case model. We then elaborate on two particular challenges of implementing a case SWIF case project: 1) Finding the case site, and 2) Identifying the focus of the case. We then discuss a number of specific challenges related to project description, assignment instructions, and project deliverables. Finally, we conclude by discussing the difficulty of closing the gaps between the promise and the reality of a SWIF case program based on our experiences as we've attempted to implement such a program over that last year and a half (beginning in January 2011). This paper makes the following contributions to the pedagogical literature on case-based action-learning programs (such as SWIF):

- We identify (and offer advice) on two immediate implementation challenges (i.e. finding case sites and identifying case foci)

- We discuss specific challenges related to project description, assignment instructions, and deliverables, and then describe ways in which we have adapted our program to address some of these challenges

- We discuss the ways in which are currently attempting to close the gaps between the promise and the reality of a SWIF case program as part of our continuous improvement efforts

TYPES OF CASES

In *The Case Study Handbook,* William Ellet, a professor at the Harvard Business School, describes his experience working with business students over the last sixteen years (Ellet, 2007). He reports that many students have acquired much of their business knowledge through lecture, discussion, and small group action learning situations. Ellet defines a cases as "substantial studies from business schools or corporations, not the slender vignettes included in many business textbooks" (Ellet, 2007, p. 5). Cases typically describe a particular situation or decision context in detail, primarily in narrative form, but do not provide any explicit answers or solutions. Ellet identifies four types of situations that occur repeatedly in cases.

A problem case describes a situation in which there is a significant outcome or result, but no explicit causal explanation is provided. To put it simply, a problem case is a situation in which something important has happened, but we don't know why.

A decision case focuses on a specific situation in which a decision is required. Regardless of the dimensions of the decision, analyzing it requires generating options, specifying criteria and providing relevant evidence.

Evaluation cases involve expressing a judgment about the worth, value, or effectiveness of an organizational outcome. An annual performance evaluation of an employee represents a real world example of this kind of case.

A rules-based case provides critical information about a particular business situation and then requires quantitative analysis of that situation. For example, a Net Present Value (NPV) calculation may be required. To complete the analysis, the student needs to know the type of information needed, the appropriate rule, the correct way to apply the rule and the data necessary to execute the rule.

Ellet describes the substance of a case. John Quelch, also of the Harvard Business School,
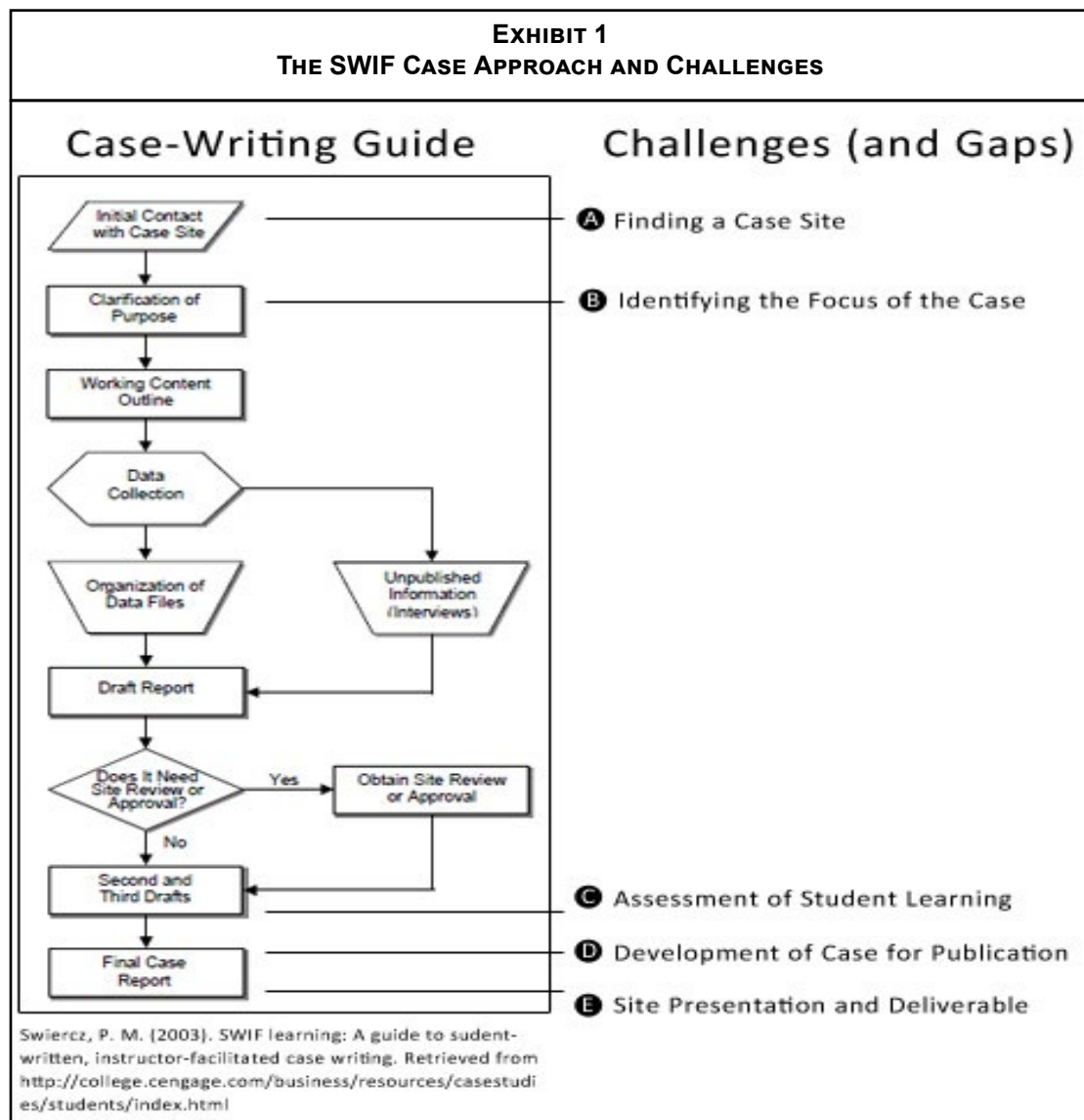
has stated the following about cases: "Basically, it needs a start, a middle, and an end. . . you also need an exciting problem and a sense of the personalities involved" (Swiercz, 2003, p. 6). The SWIF Process builds on the idea that faculty want to give students the opportunity to develop their abilities to resolve specific problems (Malo, 2010).

THE SWIF CASE MODEL

The primary guide for formulating and implanting the SWIF program in the BBA capstone course was the guide written by Professor Paul Michael Swiercz at The George Washington University School of Business (2003). The guide has

two sections. The first section provides information on the case writing process. It addresses the rationale for writing and studying cases. It points out that cases have the unique advantage of integrating theory and practice. Cases help students develop a tolerance for ambiguity and recognize the importance of separating the significant from the trivial. The guide also includes a summary of action steps for writing a case.

The second section of the guide provides several data resources and tools for evaluating cases, such as a "Self-Evaluation Checklist" for a Case Study Report. This guide was particularly important in implementing a SWIF program in the CBT at The University of Texas at Tyler. Exhibit 1 provide an overview of the SWIF case process and

EXHIBIT 1
THE SWIF CASE APPROACH AND CHALLENGES

Swiercz, P. M. (2003). SWIF learning: A guide to sudent-written, instructor-facilitated case writing. Retrieved from http://college.cengage.com/business/resources/casestudies/students/index.html

highlights the primary areas that we focus on in this paper.

FINDING THE CASE SITE

There are several ways to address this challenging task in the SWIF Program. One avenue is for the faculty members to identify case sites and assign them to the students. This allows the faculty member to influence the students toward a particular industry, organization or research interest. Another avenue is for an enterprise to request a SWIF Project. Whether for-profit or not-for – profit an organizational leader may want to have described in a case their tipping point type decisions that has been important to the organization. The students also could be asked to identify an organization and then seek the faculty member's approval. Students may have work experience with an organization or they may even want to enter the industry of the client company and seek to learn about it from a SWIF experience.

For the CBT a mixed approach is used. That is, a collaborative effort between the faculty member and the students. For both parties the source list of SWIF case sites is larger than anticipated at first. These include:

- Faculty and Staff Networking—Faculty and students have accumulated an array of organizational possibilities in their academic or professional careers to this point

- Community Based Organizations --- There are a number of organizations in the University of Texas at Tyler market that serve as sources for projects. These include

  ○ Tyler Economic Development Corporation—they often have prospecting companies that are seeking or have received funds for economic development

  ○ Tyler Area Chamber of Commerce— The members of the Chamber are regularly highlighted for their business contribution to the community. Several of these organizations are highlighted in newsletters

  ○ Hispanic Business Alliance—The geographic area is increasingly populated with Hispanic businesses. They are certainly candidates for SWIF projects as they enter the arena of the area

- Small Business Development Centers— These organizations certainly know of successful and unsuccessful startups who have sought Small Business Loans. In addition, several in the area have "incubators" that have supported successful and unsuccessful business from idea to consumer.

- SCORE Chapter—The Service Core of Retired Executives provide businesses in the area with consulting support and coaching toward success. The "coaches" serve as a source of SWIF ideas and their clients may serve as "sponsors".

- Bankers—With the intent to enhance the economic wellbeing of the area, bankers, especially community banks, are a source of success stories that students and faculty may find attractive for SWIF projects

- Accountant and Attorneys—Those professional who have served and built up a client base of emerging enterprises are sometimes willing to introduce a SWIF team to an opportunity for case writing

- Business Newspaper Sections and Journals—Public media often highlight a successful business in their publications. Digging one step deeper, the business editor for these publications is a worthy source for SWIF prospects.

Sort the List

Once the brainstorming and prospect identification has reached the needed level the next step is to sort the list according to some preset criteria. The can include:

- Key Contact person available, interested and informed about the project

- Project Timing meshes for client, students and faculty

- Willingness to provide history and adequate information to complete the project

Find the Entry Point

Essential to the SWIF project will be the enterprise contact point. Student and or faulty must determine the availability of this person or their representative during the duration of the project.

Brief the Enterprise about the SWIF Project

This briefing not only describes the objective of the SWIF Program but also the roles, scope and responsibilities for each party involved. This includes student, contact person(s) and faculty. This process can be greatly enhanced with a commitment that the students will provides a project plan and a mutually agreed to Work Break Down Schedule.

Of utmost importance to most client organizations is the confidentiality and use of client organization information. This can be addressed by consensual agreement and/or a mutually agreed to document. Issues such as the integrity expectations, protection of sensitive information and privacy are critical parts of the agreement between client organizations and students/faculty

Initial Contact with the Site

At this point the process flows with the steps identified in Exhibit 1.

IDENTIFYING THE FOCUS OF THE CASE

Given the four types of cases described by Professor Ellet, the student and faculty member embark on the process of finding the subject. Finding the right subject is a challenge. Assuming that the case site has been identified there are three general approaches that either the student or the faculty or both could call upon to begin the identification of a case subject. One, certainly is the "issue-oriented" approach. Another builds on the work of David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve is the "Appreciative Inquiry "Approach. A third is to utilize an archival approach and use secondary resources. At the CBT the third approach is only used in the capstone course when a site owner changes their mind or the student and faculty team is unsuccessful finding a willing and capable client organization which will honor the time boundaries of the semester.

Issue-Oriented Approach

Upon securing the initial site and the primary point of contact for the project, this approach identifies the most important and urgent prob-

lem to address. The client company may well have allowed the onsite visit in order to secure assistance in solving a current or lingering problem that makes a real contribution to the performance of that part or the total organization. A conversation evolves into the client organization identifying the problem they need most to solve or one that allow the "trust building" process to begin and then be established. After one or more conversation the faculty or student will be able to generate a list of one or more problems to be solved. Using criteria such as importance and urgency the list can be narrowed and a mutual helpful decision are reached. This allows the student or faculty or both to enter a behavioral contract that creates the learning experience for all parties.

Appreciative Inquiry Approach

An alternate approach that is increasingly being utilized is the Appreciative Inquiry Approach. Professor Robert Quinn at the University of Michigan has written, "Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is creating a positive revolution in the field of organizational development and change management" (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Give that most cases present a context and specific information for a student to discern the problem and offer solutions and implementation tactics a significant change is needed to enhance the situation and organizational performance. The traditional way to bring about change is to look for the problem, do a diagnosis, and then find and implement a solution. The primary focus is on what is wrong or needs to be fixed. In many cases, such a focus can lead to an inappropriately narrow approach that can magnify problem rather than resolve them. AI suggests an alternate approach. It suggests that the primary focus be on identifying what is working in an organization and explicitly addressing how change might be encouraged (de Echevarria, 2010). AI should be viewed as another tool in the case writer's tool bag.

AI can be described in many ways—as a philosophy and methodology for change leadership—here is a practice –oriented definition from David Cooperrider and Diane Whitney:

> "Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, heir organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life

to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological and human terms (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 8).

In AI, intervention gives way to inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. Through mass mobilized inquiry, hundreds and even thousands of people can be involved in co-creating their collective future.

AI assumes that every organization and community has many untapped and rich accounts of the positive—what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities, or the positive core. AI links the knowledge and energy of this core directly to an organization or community's change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Related Research

To test implementation ideas and customize the SWIF Program and Process to CBT two other resources were utilized. In the research for work done by Professor Swiercz and his colleagues at George Washington an article published in 2005 was found in the Journal of Management Education (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005). The article primarily addresses two classroom learning challenges. The first is designing team work assignment that achieves a variety of important learning outcomes and second was addressing the classic social loafing. The primary learning vehicle for the research was the SWIF case learning approach. The program at CBT does seek to satisfy a number of learning outcomes. In addition, to address the social loafing issue a team project plan, then status report preceded a written and in-class presentation of the SWIF case. The team is also asked to complete a peer evaluation process to identify the type and range of important team behavior experienced in the SWIF case writing process.

An additional reference was found where the SWIF process was being used in legal education. Dr. Theodore Lynn utilized the two previously cited Swiercz et al articles and built his findings

using the SWIF case learning approach to enhance the team work and problem solving skills of law school students (Lynn, 2009). Dr. Lynn's work provides the opportunity for students to work on unstructured interdisciplinary tasks characteristic of cross-functional teams that are found in larger law firms and multinational corporations. The work suggests, at the very least the use of SWIF for teaching of corporate governance is worthy of further study.

IMPLEMENTATION & RESULTS

We understood from the outset that our ability to successfully implement a SWIF program would be constrained by other ongoing demands on our time. We did not petition our institution for additional resources. Our intent was to experiment with the SWIF model in the context of fulfilling out teaching obligations. We reasoned that if we could successfully create a program that simultaneously enhanced student learning, increased the visibility of our institution in the community, and spilled over into our efforts to produce peer-reviewed scholarly work in the form of publishable teaching cases, we would be able to make a convincing argument for additional institutional support at some point in the future.

We engaged in limited planning during the fall semester of 2010 and formally incorporated a SWIF program into our undergraduate capstone strategic management course in the College of Business and Technology at the University of Texas at Tyler in the spring semester of 2011. The present commentary and reflections are drawn from our efforts to adapt and refine the SWIF case approach over four academic periods: Spring 2011, Summer 2011, Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 (in progress). During this time, we supervised a total of 83 SWIF case projects.

We encountered a number of challenges and modified the basic SWIF case model outlined above in a number of different ways to meet those challenges. We highlight three particular areas in which we made substantial modifications.

Project Description

Although the SWIF case approach offers the promise of engaging student in a type of action learning, it does so by requiring students to participate in the pedagogical process. Although this was apparent to us at the outset, we under-

estimated the difficulty created for students to understand the case writing process from pedagogical process.

For example, external analysis is a staple of strategic management texts. After covering this topic in the course, most students are able to demonstrate a working knowledge of the basic concepts of an external analysis—including the basics of Porter's Five Forces of Competition Model—and are capable of apply that knowledge if required to do so. In the past, for example, we have required to students to select a particular industry, and then use information available in the library (or in library databases) to conduct a Porter's Five Forces analysis of their selected industry. Most students are able to perform this task reasonably well without much additional instruction or oversight.

What may seem like a relatively simple exercise becomes much more challenging in the context of writing a case. For example, Porter's Five Forces Competition Model becomes a tool that students should anticipate readers of their cases using in their own analyses rather than an exercise they are expected to complete. In other words, students may find themselves in a situation in which they must first do a Porter's Five Forces analyses, at least informally, so that have a good understanding of the idiosyncrasies of competition in the industry in which their case is set, but their analysis will not be included directly in the case. Instead, their analysis should give them sufficient insight to decide what information they should include in the case itself so that readers of the case could conduct a Porter's Five Forces analysis of their own.

Given the different kinds of cases described above (problem, decision, evaluation, rules-based), it can become extremely difficult to explain the process of case writing, particularly to students uncomfortable with ambiguity, in a satisfactory way. Although it may be easy to communicate the general idea of a case (e.g. that a case is a narrative that describes a particular problem or decision context and then provides enough information for the reader of the case to participate in finding a solution or making a decision, etc.), it becomes much more difficult to give the students a basis for deciding what information to include in the case (and what information to exclude).

In other words, teaching students how to conduct a Porter's Five Forces analysis is one thing, teaching them how to create on paper an interesting and constructive forum in which other students can "practice" conducting a Porter's Five Forces analysis in the larger context of solving a particular problem or making certain decision recommendations is another. It is the difference between teaching students to golf—and teaching them how to design golf courses. We refer to this challenge as the "pedagogical turn" and revisit it in our discussion of gaps in the SWIF case approach below.

We raise the issue of the challenge of the pedagogical turn here to explain the first are of significant experimentation. We presented the project in at least three different ways, each of which emphasized the pedagogical turn to a different degree.

In the first semester (Spring 2011), we presented the project as a case—and provided material describing the nature of business cases and some basic instruction about how to go about writing a case. In addition to writing their own case as a class project, they were also required analyze a number of cases during the course of the semester, so we expected students would quickly become familiar with the format of a business case, if they weren't already.

In subsequent semesters, we reframed the assignment in different ways. We referred to the project in one class as a "strategic assessment." In another we described it as a thorough "SWOT" analysis. In each of these instances, the effect was to remove the pedagogical turn and allows students to focus on applying certain analytical frameworks and/or analytical tools directly. In retrospect, we realize that these changes altered the nature of project substantially. In terms of the overall objectives of the SWIF case project—enhanced learning, community involvement, and peer-reviewed scholarship—the effect of streamlining the project by deemphasizing the pedagogical turn may have enhanced student learning in some respects (by making the application process more straightforward), but reduced the utility of the project in terms of pedagogical scholarship. Again, we discuss this in more detail in our discussion of gasp in the SWIF case approach below.

Assignment Instructions

The courses in which the SWIF case approach was implemented varied from traditional face-

to-face formats, to hybrid courses with limited face-to-face interaction, to courses that were taught completely online. In face-to-face classes, verbal instruction and ad hoc explanations were delivered directly to the students. In the case of hybrid or online courses, initial ambiguity in the project description and/or instructions produced a flood of emails and phone calls seeking additional information, direction, and/or clarification. Attempts to adequately explain the project and answer anticipated questions, particularly in online courses, resulted in a 7 page single-spaced "Project Guide" that attempted to address everything from a general overview of the project, to the format of the final draft of the project, to how the project would be graded (Beal, 2011).

Class size (often 50+ students) made the assignment of individual project impossible (given other work demands). Project were completed, therefore, in team of 3-5 students. This raised the prospect of free-riding and created a situation in which team dynamics could create problems that interfered with student learning (e.g. conflicting work schedules, conflicting personalities, etc.). A series of peer evaluations was implemented during the semester to allow students to rate the individual contributions of team members.

Variation and adaptation in this area involved the aspects of the project that were emphasized in the project instructions. In some cases, aspects of project planning were emphasized (e.g. selection of a team leader, defining team roles, development of a project timeline, etc.). In other cases, these processes were left up to the team and emphasis was placed on the expected deliverable.

Deliverables

Ideally, a SWIF case approach would involve a case site (e.g. a host business). In the majority of cases, however, time constraints precluded us from securing host sites for SWIF teams. In these cases, teams were encouraged to select a business that could be researched using archival means. In terms of student learning, an archival approach has both its advantages and disadvantages. If students select the right type of business (e.g. a larger publically-traded company), then far more information can be accessed in a few hours than can be used in a case project. The challenge then becomes how to sift through this information and decide what will be used, given the focus of the case and its structure. This approach allows

the students to begin grappling with the case writing process more quickly and to devote more time to appropriately structuring the case. On the other hand, host businesses represent an action learning environment pushes students out of their comfort zones in numerous different ways and offers a number of unique and often idiosyncratic opportunities for learning not afforded by an archival approach.

In terms of the effect of our SWIF case efforts on community involvement and on our scholarship efforts, however, archival projects were a poor substitute for host sites.

CONCLUSION

We set out with the intent of leveraging a SWIF program to integrate and cross-fertilize three main areas of our professional lives: academic scholarship (i.e. publishing), teaching (i.e. student learning), and community involvement (as a component of professional service). A year and half into our implementation efforts, reflection on our progress to date suggests that significant gaps remains between our initial objectives and the program as it currently exists.

A SWIF program offers students the opportunity to engage in action learning in a host business. We had hoped that the project deliverable would benefit both students (by giving them valuable experience in a real-world business setting) and the business (by giving them access to student recommendations). While we believe that students have benefits from the SWIF program, this benefit has been limited by the necessity of encouraging archival cases, due to faculty time constraints. Finding host businesses and facilitating student engagement has proven to be particularly time consuming. Improving this aspect of our SWIF program would, we believe, require additional instructional resources. We also have reservations about the pedagogical value of requiring students to engage directly in the pedagogical process.

Developing student cases in the interests of scholarship has proven to be particularly challenging. Although student work has created opportunities for additional faculty interaction with community businesses, student deliverables, to this point, have not been of sufficient quality to support publication efforts. One of the barriers to incorporating student work into ongoing

scholarship efforts is the difficulty of getting students past the "pedagogical turn." Students tend to gravitate toward direct application of strategic management principle rather than engage in the case writing process with the explicit purpose of encouraging the reader to explore these principles on their own in the context of the case material. Consideration will be given in the future to having the students also develop an appropriate teaching note which may facilitate getting past the "pedagogical turn".

It is critical that host businesses benefit from engagement in the SWIF process. Our experience to date suggests that the level of benefit a business derives from the process tends to be directly proportional to the level of direct faculty oversight. In situations in which this has been possible, businesses have reacted positively. In cases in which students have had to manage the process on their own, reactions have been mixed.

We believe that continuous improvement efforts are largely dependent on our ability to not only refine aspects of the SWIF approach, but also to secure the additional resources required to expand and adequately oversee the SWIF program.

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