

# An Immersion Approach to Client-Sponsored Projects: Preparing Students with Soft Skills Required for Hiring - Face to Face & Virtual Methods

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## Abstract

As higher education is pressured to prove its students' readiness to work, preparing marketing students to become successful professionals requires faculty to employ a myriad of approaches. Among these approaches that emerged over the past 30 years are client-sponsored projects (CSP) as a superior method to transferring practical experience compared to utilizing text-based case studies. However, according to recent surveys, industry remains unsatisfied with baccalaureate graduates' readiness to work. Graduating student-preparedness surveys show employers claim an absence of key skills among baccalaureate graduates. To address the gap between current industry survey results, while drawing on CSP literature, this article introduces a semester-long CSP pedagogy where the classroom, face-to-face or virtual, becomes an immersion of a typical corporate team project culture thereby practicing the very skills industry report students lack. In the model presented, students serve as consultants by developing an executable marketing plan for implementation by a client company. The procedures presented yield an experience providing students with performance expectations, much like an individual working in a business environment. During the semester-long journey, students develop the key competencies to specifically address the highlighted skill gaps from surveys among hiring managers. Although most CSPs are tools to help students hone some abilities, most projects typically become nothing more than another teaching tactic. The distinctiveness of the immersion approach presented in this article expands the use of CSP with a rigorous corporate-like in-class experience for both face-to-face and fully online courses. This article describes procedures educators can use for developing a classroom experience integrating real-business world pressures, coaching, and accountability to better prepare graduating students for their careers and satisfy the skills business managers expect.

**Keywords:** client sponsored, project based, peer assessments, soft skills, critical thinking, analytical skills, customer based, job readiness

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is under pressure more so today than at any time in the recent past to demonstrate meaningful contributions to students' business success. Marketing educators wrestle with the challenges of how to best prepare students for successful careers in marketing. For professors, a particularly challenging task is how to translate marketing theory into practical knowledge and skills (Stern & Tseng, 2002). Claims indicating that marketing students lack preparation for marketing careers are traced to Peters (1980), but similar questions of preparedness have arisen in other business fields, including accounting (Gribbin, Karnes, & Paolilloa, 1994), management (Lewis & Ducharme, 1990), and operations (Ahmadi & Brabston, 1998). Bove and Davies (2010) emphasize that graduates must have practiced the application of skills before graduation. The greatest need for well-practiced skills is in marketing since marketing touches many organizational functions. More recently, Payscale's (2016, 2019) workforce-skills preparedness survey administered to over 60,000 managers showed baccalaureates lack proficiency in a number of skills areas, further emphasizing the need for higher education to fill these gaps.

Educators have experimented with multiple approaches to provide more "real world" experiences and better equip students for life after graduation. Accordingly, Wee, Alexandria, Kek, and Kelley (2003) highlight the benefits of problem-based learning in higher education. Ruhanen (2006) addressed the divide between theory and application through in-class role-playing. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009) examined the efficacy of group projects to absorb

knowledge, with or without client sponsors. Others (Herreid, 2006; Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001; Georgiou, Zahn, & Meira, 2008) explored the benefits of living case applications. Although each approach has its advantages and disadvantages, these varying methods appear to emphasize conceptual—rather than hands-on—ways of linking theory to practice (Strauss, 2011; Finch, Nadeau & O'Reilly, 2013). Projects with practical business applications better prepare students for marketing careers and satisfy critics who claim business schools overemphasize theory at the cost of practice (De Los Santos & Jensen, 1985; Diamond, Koerning, & Iqbal, 2008).

Client-Sponsored Projects (CSPs) have been employed for more than 30 years to close the divide between theory and practice. This article shares a rigorous pedagogical procedure specifically targeting deficiencies emphasized by the 63,000+ managers participating in Payscale's (2016) survey. The procedure described herein builds on suggestions made by Humphreys (1981), Lopez and Lee (2005), and Strauss (2011) for delivering successful CSPs in the classroom. Our suggested pedagogy differs from the classic application of CSP's by incorporating: 1) an organizational structure and culture similar to that experienced in business organizations, 2) use of real companies with business problems willingly providing company data to students, and 3) supplemental assignments aligned specifically to the client company's problem to afford students practice before completing client projects. These supplemental assignments are similar to the Brennan and Vos (2013) approach in which simulations are aligned with follow-up assessments. Instructors create an environment where students feel they are members of a consulting organization following a chain of command, functioning within a defined corporate team setting. Students are assigned to consulting teams, led by team leaders acting as supervisors who, in turn, report to management (faculty instructors). This approach extends the call to action by Kelley and Bridges (2005) to combine marketing education with professional development. The resulting pedagogical experience immerses students into an environment in which they are treated and coached as professionals, rather than as students.

### *1.1 Significant Gaps in Student Preparation to Enter Professional Careers*

In 2019, Payscale reported how skills impact compensation. Soft skills topped the list of those lacking in new graduates. Moreover, soft skills were deemed to be just as valuable as hard skills in determining compensation levels. This 2019 article is a follow up to Payscale's "Workforce-Skills Preparedness Report" (2016) that surveyed 60,000+ managers to assess perceptions of students' preparedness for entering the workforce. Every major media outlet in the U.S., including Forbes, Newsweek, and CBS, covered the 2016 report indicating that only about half of managers (50%) felt graduates were well-prepared for the workforce (Payscale, 2016, 2019; Strauss, 2016). Payscale's study identified key areas where these newly minted graduates fell short on both hard and soft skills, based on managers' feedback. Similar conclusions were provided in an earlier study by Wellman (2010).

Table 1. Payscale's workforce soft-skills lacking in recent graduates

% Managers reporting n=63,924	Skill
60%	Critical thinking
60%	Problem-solving
56%	Attention to detail
46%	Communication
44%	Ownership
44%	Leadership
36%	Interpersonal skills/teamwork

Table 1 shows the proportion of managers indicating the soft skills that recent graduates lack based on Payscale's 2019 report. Critical thinking, problem-solving, attention to detail, communication, ownership, and leadership were all reported as deficits by over 40 percent of managers. Interestingly, Aiken, Martin, and Paolillo (1994) reported similar results based on a survey of senior corporate executives' perceptions. Notably, combined interpersonal and teamwork skills were reported as a shortfall by over one-third of managers. Each of these skill deficiencies is described in detail in the literature review, followed by an examination of CSP-based pedagogical methodologies and the impact these methods may have on student experience, preparedness, and the client's satisfaction with the project.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Critical Thinking Skills

Managers perceive 60 percent of graduates taking jobs within their organizations do not have the necessary critical-thinking and problem-solving skills for success. Indeed, how to improve student critical-thinking and problem-solving skills is the focus of a substantial body of research (Titus, 2000; Pennell & Miles, 2009; Schlee & Harich, 2010; Madhi, Nassar & Almuslamani, 2020). However, this past research stops short of proposing integration of both critical thinking and problem-solving skills with hard-skill education.

Approaches suggested by Strauss (2011) and Jakari (2013) contain best-practice ideas for training students in critical-thinking and problem-solving. For example, Strauss (2011) introduced a *The Apprentice*-style marketing capstone course in which student teams solve a series of time-constrained real-world marketing problems. When presented with a client's problem, student teams determine what information and other resources are needed. Three to four weeks later, teams present their recommendations to the client, are issued a grade, and receive the client's competitive ranking of each team's recommendations. Additionally, a panel of expert judges may also determine students' grades.

Jaskari (2013) offered the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy as a tool for assessing critical thinking in client-based marketing projects. The goal of SOLO is to make the evaluation process simpler, easier, and more actionable. SOLO is well documented, but it is primarily an assessment tool, therefore not directly helpful in developing pedagogical solutions. Practitioners, however, are highly interested in solutions. Practitioners view deficiencies in critical-thinking skills as a major obstacle for hiring recent graduates. The gap between the classroom and day-to-day application remains substantial, regardless of the pedagogical method employed.

### 2.2 Problem Solving Skills

Higher education lacks clearly defined ways to increase student problem-solving skills and this deficiency impairs students' interviewing skills (Diamond, Koernig, & Iqbal, 2008). Problem-solving goes beyond the simple identification of business problems; it is best viewed as an iterative skill, a way of thinking, that students need to nurture and grow. According to Titus (2000), problem-solving, or more correctly, creative problem-solving is a heuristic skill of reasoning. However, the pedagogy offered by Titus for developing creative problem-solving skills stops short of addressing repetitive problem-solving skills needed for idea generation and evaluation. Therefore, an opportunity exists to provide educators with both a linear and circular pedagogy to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills over the course of a CSP. Problem-based learning (PBL) has been proposed as a potential remedy for this shortfall. While a plethora of problem-based learning (PBL) approaches are examined in the literature, Suryanti and Supeni (2019) provide the most recent qualitative data indicating that increasing student soft skills through PBL "gives students the opportunity to develop leadership skills, respect the opinions of others, control emotions, and work together, through group discussions" (p.66). It appears that generating a clear pedagogical approach has a positive influence on students' ability to problem-solve.

### 2.3 Attention to Detail

With the ever-increasing reliance on technology by generations X, Y, and Z, students depend on spreadsheets, statistics programs, presentation programs, and word processors with spell-checking, grammar-checking, autocorrect, and other editing features. Over-reliance on these tools results in decreased attention to detail as students depend on technology to take care of "the details." Students must understand the importance of paying closer attention to the details of their own products. According to Kroll (2008), there is a lack of 'mindfulness'—intellectual engagement—during student learning as speed of completion and skill training become more valued. Today's hurried and demanding environments (remote, online, hybrid) are less conducive to absorbing new knowledge and experiences, resulting in a decline in attention to detail.

This deficit in paying attention to detail is noted across disciplines, including financial accounting (Phillips, Alford, & Guina, 2012), second language learning (Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012), and system-science instruction (Wakeland, 2014). As noted in the Payscale report (2019), 56 percent of managers reported recent grads do not pay sufficient attention to work details. Regrettably, pedagogical methods to improve students' attention to detail remain virtually unaddressed in the business educational literature, although Avery (2014) hints that peer assessment may be helpful in this area. CSPs offer an excellent platform for encouraging attention to detail via a semester-long project that demands a focus on details and measures performance on this skill.

### 2.4 Communication–Writing Skills Proficiency

Not illustrated in Table 1 of Payscale's soft skills report (2019) is that 44% of managers indicate the hard skill of

writing proficiency is lacking. Past literature is replete with suggestions for improving students' written communication skills, primarily to prepare them for personal, non-professional applications. For example, Quible (1993) argues that more reading, instead of more writing, increases writing skills. Accordingly, students are encouraged to read more to enhance their exposure to more styles, approaches, and verbiage. Kellogg (2008) suggests students, to improve their writing skills, need training that improves their ability to categorize writing as falling into three broad areas: telling (such as storytelling), transforming (as in moving from one perception to another), and crafting (creating). Each category requires a somewhat different compositional focus. Zhao & Wunsch (1998) introduce the 5 C's of writing: clear, complete, concise, correct, and courteous. Dorow & Boyle (1998) discuss how to provide better feedback to improve writing. Finally, there is a considerable literature covering writing for English as a Second Language (ESL) students (e.g., Bacha & Bahous, 2008; James, 2010; Tardy, 2012, Bist, Smith, & Davies, 2019).

There is significantly less guidance in the literature on how to prepare students to write well as professionals rather than as students. Based on evidence from written correspondence, term papers, book reports, and other essays, as early as the 1950s, Dressel, Schmid, and Kinkaid (1952) concluded students are not acquiring necessary writing skills for effective communication in the workplace. Crews and Wilkinson (2010), along with Schlee and Harich (2010), note that little has been done to test ways to improve students' professional writing abilities, more than half a century later. Most efforts to improve professional writing skills are traditionally parceled out to communication courses taught in colleges dedicated to specific disciplines, such as colleges of business, education, and engineering. Each college teaches a discipline-specific focus for writing professional articles, reports, memos, letters, and other forms of correspondence. But, in a business context, a holistic client-centered project emphasizing professional communication through written and oral presentations is lacking (Baker & Thompson, 2004; Joughin, 2007; Gray, 2010; Stowe, Parent, Schwartz, & Sendall, 2012).

### *2.5 Ownership*

The Payscale surveys (2016,2019) report recent graduates' 'lack of ownership' but falls short in defining ownership. Ownership takes various forms in the literature. There is psychological ownership within a group where students feel empowered to have control over their own portion of the group's work product (Wood, 2003); ownership in the process of learning when students have a voice in the 'how' and 'what' to solve a problem (Straus, 2011); and ownership of the total project, which Jaskari (2013) says positively impacts student motivation to perform. Ownership contributes to more than motivation. Accountability goes hand-in-hand with ownership. Taking ownership in tasks means accepting responsibility if things go awry—accepting accountability for one's actions. Building a culture of ownership instills a sense of accountability with employees (Zhao, 2019). Client-based projects offer a pedagogical mechanism to imbue students with a better sense of the connection between ownership, motivation, and accountability.

### *2.6 Leadership Skills*

The leadership soft-skill deficit is especially worrisome, given the collection of research confirming team leadership is a primary determinant of team success (Kozlowski, Gully, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1996; Zaccaro, Rittman, and Marks, 2001; Suryanti & Supeni, 2019). However, leadership skill deficiency is not surprising, given the noted deficiency in teaming skills. Teaming skills are fundamentally a pre-requisite for fostering the development of leadership skills. Yet, given the demonstrated causal relationship between team leadership and team performance, DeRue, Sitkin, and Podolny (2011) point out: "There is a remarkable scarcity of rigorous theoretical and empirical research on the design and delivery of leadership teaching and education...and business schools are generally 'flying blind' with respect to the efficacy of their leadership development courses, programs, and activities" (p. 369).

Clearly, educators must improve on building better teamwork and leadership skills. The challenge is "how?" Hobson, Strupeck, Griffin, Szostek, and Rominger (2014) propose leaderless group discussion (LGD) exercises at the start and end of the semester. This effort provides an empirical tool for measuring the nature and degree of team dynamics and leadership. With LGD, a small group of individuals is assigned a problem to solve within a designated, limited time period. No formal team leader is appointed, hence the "leaderless" property of this approach. Group interactions are monitored, and students are rated on several skills, including teamwork, leadership, and communication skills.

The LGD exercise certainly is a step in the right direction for providing a formal mechanism to improve team performance and leadership acumen with students. Alternatively, the creation of a classroom corporate culture, as proposed with our approach to CSP, provides such a mechanism in that it facilitates feedback and promotes accountability from team members.

### *2.7 Teamwork & Interpersonal Skills*

Given the near-universal use of teams in U.S. businesses (Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2011), more so since the

shutdown of industries during the second quarter of 2020 due to the COVID pandemic, it is necessary for graduating students, more than ever, to have the ability to work as an integrated unit with others—teamwork. Not surprisingly, organizations consistently encourage colleges and universities to prepare curricula to build student teamwork and leadership skills (Hobson, et al. 2014). Educators have responded by increasingly employing team assignments—described in the literature as problem-based learning (PBL) exercises—in various courses (Hughes & Jones, 2011; Rafferty, 2013). But sadly, this approach continues to receive criticism, mainly due to the lack of quality feedback and coaching needed to build teamwork skills (Hansen, 2006). Moreover, when there is inadequate team observation and supervision by instructors, it is more difficult to instill teams with a sense of cohesiveness and leadership (Hughes & Jones, 2011). As a result, student team performance suffers, degrading the ability of students to internalize proper teaming skills (Messmer, 2007; Payscale, 2019).

### 3. Recommended Pedagogy for Client-Sponsored Projects: Major Components, Process, and Timeline

Client-Sponsored Projects (CSPs) are generally considered superior alternatives to the more static text-based case study approaches to marketing education (Almohaini, Choukir, & Alkhorayef, 2016). CSP's most important contribution is using real-world business problems making learning activities highly relevant to current events. CSPs tend to be multi-dimensional, where students are expected to grapple with business problems within the context of the internal (student teams and student consulting organization) and external (competition, client) environments affecting the organization's ability to perform. The result of this approach: CSPs focus on solving real problems for real companies selling real products in real businesses (West, 2011). CSPs are also referred to as Client-Based Projects (CBPs). The terms are employed interchangeably in the literature. However, we prefer to distinguish between the two as follows. The CSP is a "client-involved" project in which the project's results may impact the decision-making process of the client firm (Bove & Davies, 2009). By involving the client directly in the analysis process, the project addresses a business problem of importance to the client firm, and the client usually funds aspects of the investigation. By contrast, in a CBP scenario, the client firm may not be involved or even aware that it is the subject of a student group project.

While a number of CBP and CSP methods exist, the pedagogy suggested herein is based on the CSP consultant model where student teams work as consultants for an organizational client, along with additional instructional tools employed to support the development of the soft skills listed in Table 1. The approach differs from the usual CSP pedagogies on several levels. Most relevant to this paper is students are required, in either F2F or online (also hybrid) courses, to take 'control' of the organization's marketing process (process-based CSP). Given a clear business problem posed by the client, students recommend possible company operational modifications leading to a problem's solution. The client continues to "own" the problem (Schein, 1999). With this approach, students are held to a higher standard of performance (employee role) based on the client's determination of the likelihood of successful implementation of any recommendations produced. Kunkel (2002) recommends all deliverables be provided for client review and approval at key points during the semester to allow ample opportunity for modifications. Deliverables must be professional grade. Students' grades are dependent on how highly the client rates their recommendations.

The CBP consultant model is the foundation for the capstone marketing course at a tier-1 research public university in the Southwest. The course plan is populated with a number of pedagogical tools; however, the major contribution to learning is the semester-long client-sponsored project. Readings, exams, and exercises are designed to supplement the project and aid in both individual and team preparedness for the project. The class begins with an explanation of the course's primary objectives, which are intended to address deficiencies raised in Payscale's annual surveys. These objectives are:

- *Build problem-solving and critical thinking skills.* Students gain experience in formulating strategy and the tactical actions necessary to achieve stated client objectives. In this course, students function as consultants to the client while developing a detailed strategic and tactical execution plan to increase revenue, margins, and profits.
- *Build teamwork and leadership skills.* Students are assigned to consulting teams. Each team has an appointed leader who reports to the client and to management of the consulting agency (faculty).
- *Build practical communication skills,* both in written and verbal forms, intended for executive consumption. The emphasis is applied business communications directed at key executives in the client firm. The major deliverables to the client are a final written report of recommendations and a concise oral presentation identifying key elements of these recommendations.
- *Practice practical research and data analytic skills.* Although most students have received formal training in marketing research, marketing metrics, and data analysis, many students have limited confidence in applying these skills. A client-based project requires students to conduct both secondary and primary

research. Teams are continually reminded they must demonstrate how their research links to their strategic and tactical recommendations.

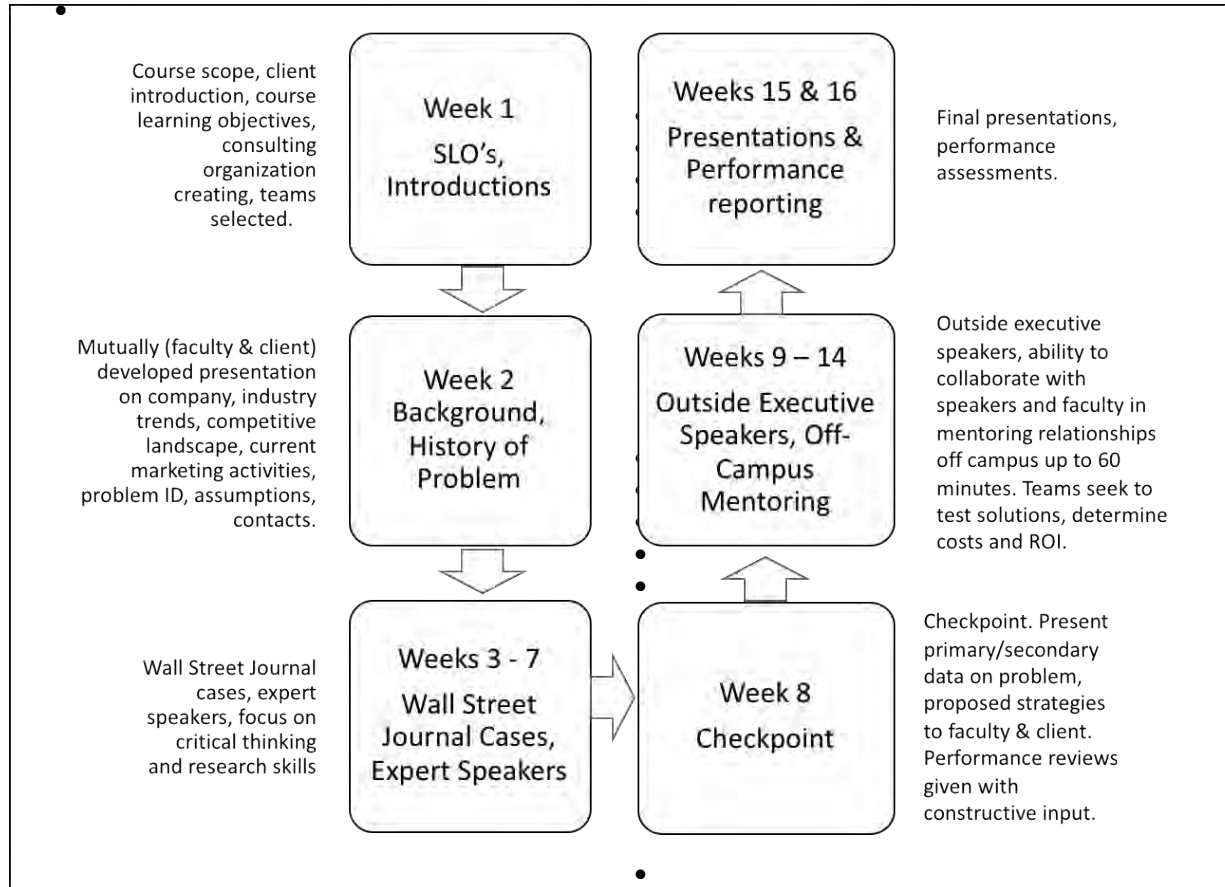


Figure 1. Project Process and Timeline

The major pedagogical and timeline components of this approach to CSP are summarized in Figure 1. We begin with a general overview of the pedagogical process as it unfolds over a semester. The overview introduces our approach and examines how we transform the classroom into a corporate business culture. Then we examine each component of the pedagogy in detail in subsequent sections.

### 3.1 Preparatory Phase

Students engage with the client for the entire semester, either F2F or virtually, culminating in team presentations to the client's senior executives along with a written report. In the past, clients have ranged from Fortune 100 companies to smaller family-owned small- to medium-sized businesses and start-up concepts. Most clients are recruited based on recommendations from existing corporate contacts, university sources, chambers of commerce, or faculty. Clients also approach the college directly based on word-of-mouth exposure. These prospective clients have become aware of the course and are interested in supporting and encouraging this form of business education. Identifying and selecting the client is the first step in the preparatory phase of the project. Clients are selected based on the following criteria:

- The client organization is large enough to ensure sufficient resources can be fielded to assist students. Resources include internal company-specific data and potential funding for acquiring external data that are not available from the client.
- The project is well-defined around a business problem important to the client that must be solved quickly and is doable within the context of a single 16-week semester.
- The client appoints one or more employees as liaisons to work closely with each student team. Only student team leaders are allowed to contact these liaisons directly.
- The client provides "compensation" to student teams. Usually, compensation is in the form of prizes awarded to the top three teams based on grading criteria employed during the final presentation to the client.
- The client provides an introductory presentation within the first two weeks of class to "kick-off" the project and a minimum of one additional campus visit (or virtual meeting) at mid-semester as a progress check.

This introductory presentation is a joint product between the client and the course instructors. Its preparation is part of the preparatory phase of the project.



Figure 2. Joe DePinto, 7-Eleven CEO presents a check at the final presentation

Ideally, clients provide a monetary contribution to the university at the final presentation. The magnitude of this contribution generally varies by client and ranges from \$1,000 to \$20,000, with an average contribution of approximately \$5,000 (Figure 2).

The process begins with client selection based on the criteria described above. Clients are recruited a year in advance, resulting in a rolling client list scheduled two semesters into the future. The recruiting process entails multiple contacts and discussions to ensure:

- *The client is fully aware of and in agreement with the course timeline.* At least three key client-specific events dominate the timeline and determine the pace of work. These include the initial presentation, mid-semester presentation, and final presentation.
- *The specific deliverables are agreed upon.* Anywhere from three to seven deliverables for projects may be required; the number is dependent upon the size of the cohort and number of instructors. Regardless of the number of deliverables, all cohort experiences are built around delivering the client a solution to the problem (typically an executable marketing plan) and practicing the soft and hard skills expected by hiring managers.
- *The client understands its resource commitments* and any limiting factors affecting the outcome of the project and recommendations provided.

A primary objective of the preparatory phase is to assist with the client's preparation for their initial presentation to the class. The general content of the presentation is examined in a later section. These preliminaries are critical precursors to ensure the highest quality outcome for both the client and students. As we overview the client project for the semester with students, we openly discuss the realities of corporate culture, employer expectations, the competitive nature of corporations, and the need to be prepared from day one to succeed in a marketing career. One important factor differentiating this instructional format from others described in the literature is the inclusion of supplementary cases for individual or team practice along the capstone project journey. In the next subsections, we explain the scope of activities by week.

### 3.1.1 Before Course Begins

Before the course begins, enrolled students are sent a reminder three weeks, two weeks, and one week prior to the first day of class to notify them that the course is team-based and provide information on how the course is delivered (F2F

or online/remote/hybrid). These prior semester notifications to individuals provide a list of student names enrolled in the course and encourage them to begin thinking about whom they may team-up with once the course begins. Preparation before the course begins has proven essential to CSP learning success (Auster & Wylie, 2006). No information is provided about the client during these notices.

### 3.1.2 Week One: Course Begins with Team Identification, Project Overview, and Grading Expectations

The number of students in the class dictates the number of teams. Generally, teams are limited to six or seven members, and these size limitations determine the number of teams. Since the project is complex and involves conducting both secondary and primary research, teams consisting of at least five members are mandatory for effectively dividing and delegating duties. In F2F courses, forming the team structure begins with selecting team leaders during class. With online sections, individual students sign up via the Learning Management System's (LMS) team tool. Volunteers as team leaders in the F2F course are asked to come forward and relate, in front of the class, their areas of expertise relevant to the project and why they are qualified to lead a team. Students in online courses use the discussion forums to introduce themselves, their skills, and desire (if any) for a leadership role. The final selection of team leaders is based on how well candidates communicate their qualifications. If there are more volunteers than leadership opportunities, team leaders are determined by a class vote, with final approval by the instructors.

Forming the team becomes fairly easy, given the extensive pre-course communications. Typically, teams have coalesced before the course begins and signup, either in F2F or online sections, takes place quickly. We have found that incentivizing students by making the team selection process a graded exercise or a bonus exercise encourages completion. Besides general marketing skills, instructors monitor the selection process to ensure teams contain students possessing marketing research, data analytic, financial, and accounting skill-sets. Students sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) to confirm client privacy requirements. This is the first-time most students are exposed to NDAs. This requirement offers an opportunity to explain why and when NDAs are needed.

The class schedule is reviewed in detail, highlighting key dates and deliverables. Assignments not directly part of the project, but that align with business skills needed to address the client's problem, are also introduced. Moreover, each instructor's calendar availability is released. For F2F sections, team leaders are required to schedule appointments to discuss their projects, findings, and progress. For online sections, time slots are posted in the LMS discussion forum as 'topics' so that teams can easily select the days, dates, and times their team can meet with the instructor. Meetings usually last about an hour, take place a minimum of eight times during a 16-week semester, and are essential, given the scope of the project. More is said about the scope and importance of these meetings in a later section.

### 3.1.3 Week Two: Client Presentation of Materials

Due to the project's complexity, the client must engage with students as early in the semester as possible, usually in the second week of class. The presentation delivered is the presentation mutually developed by the client and faculty during the preparatory phase. The slide deck is made available to students in advance. Specific key points clients are asked to cover include:

- Company background, including history, markets served, relevant financial data, and trends;
- Historical, current, and planned marketing strategies and programs (products, pricing, distribution, and IMC);
- Sales data by products and channels served;
- Cost of Goods Sold, with actual and desired Gross Margins;
- Scope of the problem, i.e., the task;
- Operating assumptions, expectations, and limitations (e.g., price cannot be changed, contribution margin targets, physical facilities cannot be modified); and
- Points of contact, contact protocol, and other resources provided.

### 3.1.4 Weeks Three to Seven: Case Challenges Aligning with Client Problem

From weeks three to seven, class time is dedicated to reviewing living mini-cases extracted (usually) from *Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Business Review*, or other sources illustrating current business problems. Cases are selected to align with the client's problem and research or data analysis skills that students must possess for the project. Industry speakers often visit to address particular skill sets (Social Media Marketing, Purchasing, Logistics, etc.), depending on the project's particular parameters. Mini-case challenges that align with the client's business offer students practice focusing their critical thinking, research, analytic, and communication skills applicable to the CSP.



### 3.1.5 Week Eight: Mid-semester Checkpoint and Peer Review

Week eight is an important checkpoint as teams must present their primary and secondary data and proposed strategies to faculty and client representatives. Each team receives 20-30 minutes in separate meetings with the clients' representatives and faculty. Teams are required to employ slide decks as the backbone of their "give-and-take." Separate meetings between each client representative and each team are employed to ensure teams are exposed to a diversity of opinions. In our experience, group-think creeps into these meetings when all company representatives participate in discussions with every team, hindering creative thinking.

This is likely the first time many students have presented in front of executives, giving them a taste of what to expect at the final presentation. Subsequent to the presentation, individual students complete a constructive feed-back form on each of their teammates. Google Forms is the simplest solution found so far to: 1) generate a survey instrument to collect data from each student, 2) auto-generate data aggregated onto a spreadsheet, and 3) generate anonymous e-mails containing feedback to individuals with their team members' ratings along with constructive suggestions. The feedback assesses the following behaviors:

- *Cooperation.* To what extent did the team member proactively encourage cooperation within the team?
- *Share of effort.* To what extent did the team member perform/contribute his or her share of work?
- *Usefulness of input.* To what extent were the team member's contributions useful and aided the final project outcome?
- *Attitude toward team and project.* Did the team member consistently exhibit a positive attitude toward the team and the project?
- *Attendance and preparedness.* How reliable was the team member with respect to attending group meetings, providing needed materials, and was ready to work?
- *Focus on the task.* Was the team member consistently focused on the task and what needed to be done?
- *Communication.* Did this teammate communicate often, respond quickly, and engage with others regularly?

Passing this checkpoint indicates teams are functioning effectively and are effectively in 'competition' with other teams in the course.

### 3.1.6 Weeks Nine to Fourteen

Weeks nine through 14 consist of additional executive visits with presentations to the class on a variety of related marketing topics, and more time set aside in each class for teams to meet with faculty. There are several goals for these meetings: encouraging students to reflect on the problem, presentation of ideas, field questions, encourage student motivation/interest, recognize efforts so far, and discussing how the inclusion of the client project augments students' resumes.

Outside of class, supplementary team meetings with faculty ramp up. Some instructors use team mobile applications such as GroupMe to monitor team chat outside of class. Every team receives a minimum of 10 faculty hours split among all faculty. For example, a cohort with 12 teams, seven members each, results in a minimum of 120 faculty hours designated just for team meetings with faculty. These meetings are normally 60-minutes and focus on strategy, tactics, and presentation skills. For F2F courses, meetings are usually conducted off-campus in a relaxed environment (a local Starbucks or Panera Bread is the usual venue of choice); for online sections, a virtual communication app such as Zoom is used. If a team is off-track, seems to lack focus, or is otherwise in trouble, that team is offered a choice: team members can re-focus and deliver, or the team will not be allowed to present to the client. This latter option results in a low grade in the class; not presenting to the client is a clear indication of the team's performance shortfall. Interestingly, all teams that maturely and objectively confront this option typically change course and produce results.

During this phase of the project, clients experience a slowdown in team requests for information and feedback. This natural slowdown may cause some concern with clients, as there may be an impression of teams becoming disengaged. Faculty must remain vigilant at this point to identify any signs of concern by the client. An additional peer review takes place using the same procedure as the mid-term checkpoint. Some faculty have found that assigning a portion of the overall course grade to peer feedback motivates students to engage, discouraging non-participation. Other faculty incorporate poor peer feedback into their absence policies to discourage students from hiding-out in a group setting.

### 3.1.7 Weeks Fifteen and Sixteen: Final Document Submissions and Oral Presentations

Teams deliver their final written draft of their plan, including illustrations, promotional campaign selections, messages, costs, sales forecasts, and break-even analysis. A final peer review, making this the third peer review, is completed by

the end of week fifteen. By this point, teams have had ten meetings with the instructor and four or five meetings with the client.

The formal boardroom presentations to the client is the focus in week 16. For F2F classes, presentations are scheduled outside of normal class time, typically from 4:00pm to 10:00pm on Monday night for the convenience of the client company. Teams are asked to arrive well in advance of their scheduled presentation time. Normally, teams are provided with a preparation room and encouraged to conduct a last-minute review of their materials and presentation protocol. Teams are allotted 30 minutes for their presentations, including question time from executives. Teams are not allowed to observe the presentations delivered by competing teams. All presentations are recorded and archived for future use. The only difference with online courses is that teams schedule times to deliver their presentations during a virtual meeting, and an online poll may be included for client representatives to score teams. If an instructor decides to do so, it is not uncommon for students in the following semesters to view these recorded presentations.

Also, during the last week of class, week 16, two essential events take place. First, the top two teams deliver their winning presentations to the entire class either in person or via online video conferencing. This is the first time teams are able to view the presentations delivered by competing teams. We find there is considerable self-evaluation as teams are exposed to the difference between their presentations and those made by the winning teams. Second, all teams receive specific feedback on their proposed strategy, tactical execution, financial analysis, and presentation skills. It is important to be certain team members understand what they did well, what needs improvement, and, most importantly, how to continue building on their skills.

### 3.2. Final Team Grading

Final team and individual students' grades are based on the following items:

1. *Client and faculty evaluations of each team's presentation as described above.* The client's opinion of the final presentations and each team's strategic and tactical recommendations carries the greatest weight. In fact, before determining the winning team, the client reviews the final grading results and can use their judgment to change grades and rankings.
2. *Team members' evaluations of other team members and the team experience overall.* As indicated earlier, each team member anonymously evaluates their team experience, dynamics, and performance.

The faculty, client, and students evaluate soft skill performance on the following rubric categories:

- *Group cooperation.* Extent to which team members worked together, leveraging each member's abilities and knowledge to make the project come together.
- *Distribution of group tasks.* Extent to which work was allocated fairly based on the abilities and interests of the members.
- *Group leadership effectiveness.* Perceptions the team had a leader who provided appropriate direction to organize team efforts and keep team members focused on the task.
- *Intragroup communications between members.* Extent to which team members shared work for group feedback.
- *Individual team member participation.* Extent to which individual team members remained engaged. Would the team member work with members of this team again?
- *Listening to and respecting others' points of view.* Extent to which team members listened to the views of others, and used that information to improve the project.
- *Courtesy and respect of other team members.* Extent to which team members were courteous and valued others' opinions.

### 3.3. Faculty Requirements

The pedagogy proposed here is faculty-intensive. We team-teach the course and employ at least two doctoral-level students as assistants. The two-person faculty team consists of one professor and one lecturer. The faculty member serves the role of "theoretical advisor" while the lecturer is the "applied marketing advisor." This dichotomy works well. The lecturer plays a key role. For our course, the lecturer is a retired C-level executive and an active consultant with an internationally-ranked agency. This individual brings "reality" to the project and helps provide students with a perspective similar to that expected from the client. Equally important, the lecturer's network of industry contacts is a source of future clients.

Graduate student assistants can be drawn from either doctoral or master's programs. The primary qualification is that the assistants must have some industry experience and have ample course-work relevant to their role in the project. These student assistants are assigned to teams as advisors. Three or four assistants are preferred. Each is assigned to two or more teams. They function in the same supervisory capacity as faculty and are required to be available to teams outside of class. Assistants specifically are tasked with advising teams on data acquisition and interpretation, including sourcing secondary data, questionnaire construction, sampling, questionnaire administration, and data analysis. In our experience, even those students who have done well in marketing research and statistics courses still need assistance in critical thinking and problem solving for the CSP.

#### **4. Client-Sponsored Projects: The Pedagogical Benefits**

Probably the most essential aspect of our approach to CSP is that it attempts to mimic aspects of organizational structure and culture experienced in business organizations as they affect team dynamics. In this section, we elaborate on the importance of simulating corporate team culture and our approach to transforming the classroom into a business environment.

##### *4.1 Simulating the Corporate Team Culture*

The tone is set for the class during the first week. Via the course learning objectives and introductory comments made the first week, we emphasize the philosophical underpinnings of our CSP pedagogy and how the learning experience in the class will unfold. Because students will be acting as employees for a consulting agency hired by the client, the following rules and expectations area emphasized:

- Attendance, team and class participation, and team engagement are mandatory and closely monitored;
- Adherence to correct business terminology and professional communication standards are essential; and,
- Performance expectations are high. Business is highly competitive. Employers demand that personnel are high performers capable of conducting/leading focused and integrated team efforts. Positive can-do attitudes are essential for team success.

After the first week, the tone of the class quickly shifts to embrace a client-orientation. Students focus on generating a solution for the client, rather than on earning grades. All students are tasked, as members of their teams, to provide realistic implementable solutions/recommendations that will achieve the client's stated objectives. Financial objectives are normally specified (e.g., reduced costs, increased revenue, higher margins, market share, profits), but non-financial objectives in other areas important to the client can be specified, such as social responsibility and sustainability. From the beginning, all students "own" their performance and are held accountable for their decisions, like any corporate employee.

Other aspects of the business environment are emulated in the classroom. For example, students have access to our calendars, understand available times, and schedule appointments as would any employee. Students who are consistently late to class are counseled by both the team leader and faculty. It is made abundantly clear most corporations have policies covering tardiness, and explain how latecomers are distractions for other team members and can negatively affect team performance.

We hold team leaders to a higher standard than team members. All team requests and communications directed to the client and faculty (recall that faculty play the role of the consulting firm's supervisors) go through the team leader. Any question we receive directly from students relevant to the project is passed to the team leader to address. If we notice a significant number of questions from a team, we reach out to the team leader requesting an explanation of why so many questions are arising from the team. This level of accountability sets an example for the team leader's use with his/her team. This is the toughest "cultural change" to implement. Students are all too accustomed to direct communications with instructors. As a result, at times, we provide direct student feedback when it is apparent that team leaders fail to (or choose not to) modify their team members' behaviors.

##### *4.2 Writing Proficiency*

In a business climate, writing takes many shapes and forms, including e-mail communications, executive summaries, presentation preparations, and reports. We exercise all four during the scope of each CSP.

###### *4.2.1 E-mail Communications*

Students are required to copy faculty on all e-mails to clients. Often, after the initial client e-mail, feedback is provided to both the team leader and the team. Feedback covers the construction of the e-mail, communication style, format, and use of bullets, length of e-mail, and more. The best form of feedback is replying to the e-mail and pointing out

strengths and opportunities. We find students tend to use too many abbreviations (BTW, IMO, etc.), are too wordy, and do not utilize bullet points effectively. We encourage students to provide a brief opening sentence, introduce the topic, and use short bullet points. The central theme of the e-mail must fit within a phone's screen, since executives often read e-mails on their phones. A message fitting on a mobile screen increases the potential of being read by the recipient.

#### 4.2.2 Written Reports and Presentations

Every report and oral presentation requires an executive summary. The vast majority of students do not have experience preparing executive summaries, particularly those intended for C-level executive consumption. Students are instructed the first week on the importance and content of executive summaries. They are given an executive summary template provided by a top consulting firm. Reinforcing the executive summary's purpose (and importance) accompanies every written and oral presentation assignment throughout the semester. The goal is to ensure students understand the importance of sharing key points succinctly and highlighting project benefits on one page, utilizing visuals and bullet points to convey critical information elements.

Students are prepped for their final case presentation and its associated written report with every class assignment. We see considerable improvement in writing styles and oral deliveries by the time students complete their final reports and deliver their final presentations. By course's end, students have received substantial feedback on their communications skills from both faculty and the client, and have digested a range of articles from the *Wall Street Journal* and other sources. This varied exposure provides students with numerous data points and stimulates improved communication skills.

It is common practice for students working as teams to divide up the work when compiling report drafts. The tendency for teams is to append their individual parts together with little consideration given to how well all sections fit together and flow as a professional document. We emphasize to team leaders that it is their responsibility to make sure the entire draft is consistent in terms of style and the logical progression and professional presentation of information. We expect students to proof each other's inputs to all drafts carefully. If the team leader is weak on grammar, spelling, and general writing skills, an alternative team member is tasked as the proofing agent.

#### 4.3 Public Speaking and Presentation Delivery Skills

Teams' presentation development and delivery skills are exercised beginning in week three via the mini-case exercises. During the semester, students present anywhere from five to seven times employing presentation slide decks. Presentation slide decks also are required for each team's weekend meetings with faculty and any meetings with the client's representatives. These latter presentations to faculty and client reps progressively develop into the final presentations teams deliver to the client in week 15. It is normal for teams to update parts of these presentations 10-15 times during the semester based on our feedback and feedback from the client's representatives.

Our feedback focuses on all facets of the presentation. Team presentations are critiqued in front of the class after the team completes its first presentation, usually based on a mini-case from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Business Review*, or other sources. This can be an uncomfortable experience for team members, but the approach allows everyone to learn from one another and aids in building the desired team culture. Feedback revolves around three significant areas: *the message*, *visual appeal*, and *delivery*.

##### 4.3.1 The Message

We stress that all presentations should tell a story starting with "what" (the main idea). Then, the message needs to explain the "why" (the rationale or justification), and finally, the most important part, the "how" (implementation). Early in the semester, teams struggle with this approach. Teams tend to focus on the idea (the "what") without thinking through the justification or rationale for why their idea is noteworthy. Rarely do teams progress to the "how;" how to implement the idea realistically.

We also stress early on the importance of presentation style. How the message is communicated is often more important than the message itself. For example, teams' initial presentations often consist of long, drawn-out sentences that are read directly from slides. Students are gently reminded the person listening to the presentation can read.

##### 4.3.2 Visual Appeal

Considerable time is spent guiding students on the basic principles of slide deck development. Students are referred to a wide assortment of available materials providing tips for developing and delivering presentations. Emphasis is placed on minimizing the number of presentation slides required to effectively deliver the message and employ visually appealing graphics, rather than rely on bulleted lists. Viewers more rapidly capture and process information conveyed

with images as opposed to text. The more attractive and appealing is the presentation, the more likely the audience remains engaged. The presentation adage “death by bullets” is humorously interjected into our reviews of teams’ initial presentations.

#### 4.3.3 Delivery

Most novice presenters revert to old delivery habits, often without realizing they are doing so. Whether it is repeating inappropriate words or phrases (“like,” “you know,” “um”), swaying back and forth, pacing, excessive gesturing, poor posture, talking too fast, or talking in monotones, students often are not conscious of their physical and verbal “tics.” Great presenters are purposeful in their tone, movement, and storytelling. While most educators focus on presentation structure and content, we go further, offering feedback on how the message is delivered, i.e., students’ presentation skills. Physical and verbal tics suggesting nervousness are noted and shared with each presenter, along with suggestions on how to rectify the habit in question. Students are asked to critique each other’s presentation habits and errors and point out what they did right. Individually counseling with targeted feedback is used for students who exhibit similar behaviors in subsequent presentations. Teams are encouraged to do some supplementary reading concerning presentation skills. There are many simple, inexpensive booklets on developing and delivering presentations, such as Hindle’s *Making Presentations* (Hindle, 1998).

Teams are encouraged to record themselves while practicing their presentations. Improvement in each team’s presentation content and delivery throughout the semester is noteworthy; in some cases, the improvement is remarkable. By the time teams make their final presentations to the client, presenters are more confident, their movements are more fluid and purposeful, they are better able to use voice inflections to emphasize key points, and are more skilled in the proper use of gestures.

#### 4.4 Data Analytic Skills

A primary benefit of our approach to CSP is teams’ ability to directly reach out to the client for company and industry-specific data. The client’s willingness and ability to provide such data is addressed during the preparatory phase of the project. This means teams have greater exposure to key performance indicators and trends as monitored by the client. Students incorporate the client’s data with the results of their own primary and secondary research to develop strategies and action programs. Teams are required to specifically relate key research data to their strategies and tactical actions; teams must show how their recommended strategies and tactics have emerged from the research data. An ongoing question directed at teams as they review strategic and tactical recommendations with faculty is: “What research led you to this recommendation?” We emphasize the need to demonstrate linkage to the client during all discussions and presentations, particularly with their final presentation.

Most of our CSPs focus on companies involved in B2C marketing. As a result, primary research conducted by teams usually takes the form of consumer surveys. Most team members have taken a dedicated marketing research course. This project allows them to put those skills to work. Teams develop, pre-test, administer survey instruments, compile and analyze the resulting data, and summarize the data into a meaningful and useful format for inclusion in their draft reports and presentations. Due to the severe time constraints imposed by semester-long courses, we advise clients that limitations exist concerning the validity and generalizability of findings based on teams’ primary research.

Teams must show that all strategic and tactical action recommendations have a positive financial impact. Hence, teams must develop some form of revenue, cost, and profit projections. These projections usually take the form of proforma income statements, break-even analysis, estimates of market potential, estimated changes in market share, or use of other appropriate metrics. Each team’s final report must include these analyses. In our experience, this is a rather weak area for most students, particularly for marketing majors; it is a major reason why we try to place students with financial, accounting, and data analytic backgrounds on each team. We also include a series of graded review exercises on financial analysis and metrics in the course LMS. Students must complete these exercises within the first two weeks of the semester. We encourage students to work on the exercises as teams, but students must individually submit their solutions.

A portion of each team meeting with faculty is devoted to data analysis and data interpretation issues, including data acquisition, financial analysis and projections, identification and use of appropriate business metrics, and statistical analysis. We take this opportunity to ask pointed questions about financial models, inquire about information points to ensure the analysis is correct, and challenge students to find ways to collect more, and potentially, better data. During grading of the final team presentations, the client and faculty heavily weight recommendations’ financial viability.

#### 4.5 Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills go hand-in-hand. In addition to the critical thinking and problem-solving

skills wrapped into the project, the course employs a series of “mini-cases” based on current articles taken from various sources. The first mini-case usually occurs the sixth or seventh week of class and offers teams the first opportunity to present in class. Cases are selected based on their relevance to the project or relevance to students’ career development. Because of their currency and relevance, students are generally quite interested and readily engage. Normally, several cases are assigned to teams in a single class period. However, no more than two teams work on the same case. Limiting the number of teams working a single case makes the exercise more interesting and engaging than would be possible had all students worked the same case. An additional benefit is that there is a sense of competition between those teams that are assigned the same case. Teams have 60 minutes to identify strategic and tactical recommendations and put together their presentations. Presentations are limited to 10 minutes. In a virtual environment, teams work offline, then present in a virtual session. This virtual approach provides teams a relaxed environment in which to prepare before their virtual presentation to the entire class.

In this first presentation, teams develop creative strategies that, on the surface, appear as workable. However, the details of most recommendations need additional work. After each team's presentation, we usually ask: "What is needed to implement your idea?" This initiates the question-and-answer process which helps focus the team's attention on critical missing information or considerations. As the question-and-answer process continues, we inquire about issues related to potential demand, revenue, costs, profits, key assumptions, limiting factors, etc. The line of questioning focuses students on the "how" of the plan. This process continues until students outline the steps needed to take the strategy from concept through the steps needed to execute. After available facts and considerations are vetted, we ask the team if they are still willing to pursue the strategy. By this time, it becomes clear to most teams they have not correctly or critically thought through their recommendations. This eye-opening experience builds realization (an ‘aha’ moment) of how taking an idea to execution is a difficult proposition.

Every time a team presents, we follow the same format. Our questions focus more on the "how" and the financial ramifications of the proposed strategy. Across presentations, the same points are reiterated multiple times, affording students multiple opportunities to come at their idea from multiple angles; their ability to think critically and offer better solutions to problems improves with each mini-case event. Building critical thinking and problem-solving skills requires exposure, practice, and, most importantly, asking the right questions. The mini-case exercises help students understand the complexities of formulating strategy and tactics. By the end of the semester, the roles are often reversed as students begin asking us more complex questions, offering deeper perspectives about their plans, and outlining their points more clearly.

#### *4.6 Attention to Detail Skills*

In business, mistakes are detrimental to the success of any company. Early in the semester, the tone of the ‘work environment’ is created to make it clear that avoidable mistakes on presentations or written reports are not acceptable. In fact, if the final presentation or report has significant spelling, punctuation, spacing, or computational mistakes, the team is penalized up to a full letter grade. Errors are pointed out as they are encountered during project reviews. By regularly communicating expectations, team members are encouraged to proactively critique each other's work, which further promotes teamwork.

#### *4.7 Leadership and Teamwork Skills*

A major objective of the course is to create a pseudo-organizational structure, thereby instilling a sense of corporate culture in the classroom environment. Faculty sit at the top of the structure, while team leaders serve as front-line managers, responsible for the leadership of their teams. Team leaders are required to name a second-in-command as backup in case the team leader is not available. As in a typical business setting, communication flows up and down this chain. Faculty and client representatives provide information and feedback to team leaders for further dissemination. This is the first time many students are placed in leadership positions in a “business” environment and are held accountable for results. Faculty coach team leaders offering advice on feedback techniques, accountability tactics, and communication approaches. Our goal is to give team leaders real-life exposure to leading a team in a business environment.

Not all team leaders are effective. Some volunteer for the position and quickly resign once the difficulties and complexities of the role become apparent. Faculty remain sensitive to the problems teams may experience as a result of a struggling leader. Team leaders who encounter problems with team members are counseled and offered suggestions on how to cope. Team leaders and members usually resolve most conflicts themselves. By monitoring emerging situations but allowing teams to work through problems together, better outcomes are achieved. But, if major issues go unresolved, faculty get involved to redirect efforts. A consistent trend over the last several years is that teams with the best team leaders have the best proposals and winning presentations.

A strong leader creates a strong team. Since we meet with each team from seven to nine times during the semester and watch the team interact for 15 weeks, we have a front-row view of team dynamics. The reality is, throughout the semester, teamwork is encouraged. It starts with creating teams consisting of students with different experiences. This gives each team member something to contribute. During our meetings with teams, we ask who is responsible for each task and talk about the importance of delegation for team success. Moreover, all teams understand that a team is only as strong as its weakest link. Therefore, if a team member is going through a hard time or is struggling, the team needs to provide support. Finally, since team evaluation is a component of their overall course grade, each student is aware of the importance of being active and engaged. Team leadership capable of fostering positive team dynamics is the cornerstone for successfully simulating corporate structure and culture within the classroom.

## 5. Discussion

The marketing capstone course serves as a transitional event, where students can apply learned knowledge and skills to real-life marketing business applications. Marketing instructors use myriad approaches, including CSP to accomplish this transition. This article describes how CSP can be modified to encourage better development of essential skills for graduating marketing students. This modified approach to the client-sponsored project advocates an “executive” approach to leading students by creating a pseudo-business organizational structure and corporate culture within the classroom. Students serve as working consultants to a client for the entire semester with full access to executives, business data, and existing strategic plans. Faculty act as managers of the consulting agency. At the end of the semester, each team presents and provides two deliverables to the client: A written report of the team’s recommendations and an oral presentation summarizing essential elements of strategy, tactical actions, and anticipated outcomes. Teams are evaluated based on the quality of their proposals.

This approach to CSP simulates an internship in many ways. Students work with business leaders, developing plans expected to “go to market.” In preparing their strategy and execution plans, students conduct primary and secondary research, analyze multiple data points, and develop a presentation and a written proposal with supporting financial projections. A major point of difference from the standard internship is faculty serve as hands-on coaches and mentors.

Student sentiment validates the executive approach to the client-sponsored project. Semester after semester, the course consistently is touted as among the “most challenging, but also the “most rewarding.” Comments from students include:

- "I appreciated your guidance and support along the way. I learned a ton in the class."
- "Your class was the toughest I've had, but by far the best."
- "Your class prepared me the best for my job. It all makes so much sense to me now. I feel much more qualified in my job, thank you."
- "Everything from my other courses is pulled together on our client project."

Enrollment in the class has grown over the last several years, with the waitlist growing each semester. Students want to be challenged. They want to network with business leaders. They want to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in knowing they played a role in preparing a plan valued by an important company.

Positive feedback is received from clients in a number of ways. Some clients request specific students (usually on the winning teams) to interview for positions within their companies. Others are impressed enough with the quality of work that they ask to schedule an additional project to tackle another emerging issue. Typical comments from clients are:

- "There are eight to ten ideas we can implement."
- "I can give this execution plan to our front-line manager, and we can apply it tomorrow."
- "The project was well worth the time and effort my executives spent with the teams."
- "We would not have thought of the ideas these students generated, thank you!"

## 6. Future Directions

From a rigor standpoint, a call to action to apply a pre-course and post-course assessment is needed to quantify significant changes in students’ soft skills. The proposal to measure student soft skills before and after the semester is doable by using existing scales; however, the business education literature is thin in providing guidance.

The Client Sponsored Project pedagogy is dynamic in nature. The course is continuously reviewed to identify ways to improve the student/client experience. An ideal outcome is for a CSP to benefit everyone involved: client, students, and faculty. By developing student skills to provide more qualified future professionals, we are, at the same time,

providing value to client organizations. As a result, companies are proactively reaching out to participate in CSP possibilities. Presently, the following modifications for future iterations of the course are under consideration:

- Videotaping practice presentations for students to benefit from an additional perspective on how they perform in front of a room.
- Employing a ‘communication coach’ for students to hear from a professional skilled at displaying the best performance during a presentation.
- Team-building exercises immediately after team formation to enlighten students on the dynamics of teaming with one another for improved performance.
- Finally, exploring additional ways to celebrate student successes during the process, rather than at the end of the course. Businesses thoughtfully use recognition to motivate and reward employees; we need to find similar methods.

The challenge to helping students better prepare for a business career is absorbing the business world's reality within a classroom setting. While it is not possible to simulate the totality of business culture in the classroom, it is possible to emulate key aspects of project team environments. Implicit with this process is that students must be forced to grapple with the reality that they are responsible for managing multiple performance expectations and outcomes, as well as the potential synergistic relationships between them. For example, when presentations are reviewed, we critique all aspects of the presentation, its preparation, and its delivery. Feedback is not limited to one area, but covers all areas, integrating how each skill combines with another to meet performance expectations.

## 7. Limitations

Our rendition of CSP is not without potential drawbacks. The most serious of which is the requirement that multiple faculty members team-teach the course. The faculty team we employ consists, usually, of one professor, a lecturer, and two or three doctoral student assistants. We recognize that many universities and colleges do not have sufficient faculty and student resources to staff the course as we do. Team teaching is generally not employed in most business schools due to workload policies. We have worked through these restraints by combining two courses, each assigned to a single faculty member. We combine our undergraduate capstone course with the MBA-level marketing management course. Combined courses benefit in two ways. First, faculty from the original courses are pooled (as are graduate student assistants) for the combined section. Second, the combined course permits teaming MBA students with undergraduates. This has proven beneficial as our MBAs usually have substantial work experience that leads to improved team performance. However, we should note that an MBA student on the team does not always mean he or she will be the team leader. Indeed, many of the “winning” teams have been led by undergraduates.

Faculty meetings with teams outside of class, such as our coffeehouse meetings held on weekends, may be problematic. It goes without saying that more virtual meetings are taking place than coffeehouse-type meetings given the current health crisis. Faculty must be willing and committed to course goals. Informal meetings at local coffee shops made this a rather enjoyable experience for both students and faculty pre-pandemic. These meetings had the added benefit of allowing faculty to get to know individual students, their strengths and weaknesses, and their commitment to the team effort. Although informal meetings are not mandatory for students, they are strongly encouraged to attend as work schedules and family commitments allowed. Team leaders are tasked with tracking attendance and informing faculty of problems students may be experiencing with missing informal discussions.

In some cases, clients are not able to provide all the resources required by teams. We maintain an ongoing pool of funds, drawn from past clients’ donations to the business college, to partially offset such problems. For example, it is occasionally necessary to purchase trade association reports or industry data. Teams conducting consumer surveys sometimes need access to commercially available subject pools. At times, we may fund the reproduction costs for presentation books and reports distributed to clients during final presentations.

In summary, client sponsored projects are part of many curricula and are excellent tools for better preparing students for careers after graduation. Nevertheless, even with the increased use of CSP's in business schools, companies report that students are not capable of meeting performance expectations. Our approach to creating a corporate setting and culture in the classroom provides students with an environment to conducive to critical thinking and the practical application of marketing skills. Additionally, our coaching style and feedback mimics what students face in a full-time job. Real-time hands-on experience with a client and holding students accountable produces superior educational results. Creating a culture in that exposes students to corporate team dynamics exposes them to the skills needed to succeed in their post-graduation careers.



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