

## **Developing and Delivering a Consulting Project Course Abroad**

Daniel D. Butler

*Auburn University/Auburn, Alabama*

Increasingly, employers that hire today's university graduates want students with both knowledge and applied skills. In addition to content delivered via majors, employers seek graduates with critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills (i.e., verbal and written). A natural fitting exercise to meet these desires is the utilization of consulting projects or project-based learning as part of a Study Abroad Program. Many faculty and students are apprehensive about presenting and enrolling, respectively, in such a course. This essay will provide a beginning point to deliver a successful consulting program abroad.

### **A Consulting Project and Program Rationale**

Consulting is the process of giving expert advice to people working in a professional or technical field. Students embedded in a consulting course are sought out to provide advice relating to management practices, technology choices, investment strategies, business and marketing planning, etc. Consultants help with diagnosing a client's situation, solving problems, and implementing solutions. (Fombrun and Orleskek 2004, p. 4). Consulting classes may be provided across industry domains (i.e., engineering, health care, leadership, manufacturing, services, etc.) (Hull et al 2016, Swamidass, 2005)

First time students who are presented the opportunity to take an international consulting class and work for a client at the same time are ambivalent. Students and faculty who have not been consultants or trained in that domain may feel inadequate. Negative arguments to enrolling and /or facilitating a consulting class usually reside in the area of expertise, experience, and knowledge. I cannot possibly be a consultant, especially in another country, as I have no formal experience as a consultant.

Countering this argument is the fact that everyone is a consultant in some regard. Consulting is seen by many as an intimidating domain when it should not be. Don't people ask others for advice on where to dine, what to wear, a car to purchase, what to purchase at the grocery store, etc.? These queries may be face-to-face or utilizing sources such as social media. Any situation in which the giving of advice occurs is actually the foundation for what consulting is all about. Consulting is helping an entity frame a problem in such a way that information and analysis will provide insight leading to actionable recommendations.

There are entities that certify individuals regarding their level of knowledge and competence. These include associations and boards (e.g., Accounting, Finance, Medical, Legal, Management Consultants, etc.). Each of these certified individuals, in fact, provide their expertise to a given situation. They provide advice and help based on what they have learned. Faculty are certified in their specific knowledge domain via their academic qualifications (i.e., degrees). Faculty provide advice (expertise) to students and their academies. So, in fact, faculty are already in the advice business. They meet the basic definition of "consultant."

Students interested in enrolling without any formal consulting experience are apprehensive as well. Their confidence levels are correlated to both their subjective and objective knowledge base (Brucks 1985). What students think they know (subjective) may be more or less than what they actually (objective) know. Many simply do not understand that their entire body of knowledge (learned formally and informally) constitutes an ability to provide input and perspective to clients. It is important that students understand they will have the ability learn to learn what is important to provide advice and recommendations to a client.

A client is defined as any entity for which your student teams will be providing advice. These can be businesses, governmental agencies, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and not-for-profit

organizations. For the record, not-for-profit does not mean not for money. It takes cash to stay in business. Clients are those for whom the final consulting deliverables will be presented.

Finding willing and able clients abroad is challenging. Finding the right client is what is most important. Look in your own backyard first. If you are new to this process, look to your current relationships first. This includes current students, your Career Center where companies come to recruit students, alumni, corporate sponsors, and the Development unit on campus. Look for organizations willing to take a chance on student consultants. Understand that if there are entities that currently support your university (i.e., hire your students, support your programs) you already have an advantage as they see value for their organization from your university. Partners or academic peers at your international destination have the same advantage to look in their backyard for clients. Finally, there are businesses that will match clients to your program for a fee.

For this entire process to be successful there must be an intersection of needs of the client, faculty and students in terms of academic outcomes. The key activity to achieve an overall favorable outcome is to effectively manage expectation across all entities.

### **Manage Expectations**

To successfully develop an international consulting program, framing the message (i.e., communicating what consulting is and the process used) is very important. From the beginning, the person responsible for developing the international consulting class must be aware of their language and its meaning. They must be aware of the process to help convince business owners, faculty, and students of the value of the course, the skills necessary to work on a project, and the outcomes to expect. The faculty member must vet companies for the level of a potential client's needs matched with the abilities of their students.

Potential clients want their problems solved. Some clients do not know the scope of their problems nor how an outsider may be able to help them. Clients want to be assured they will receive value for their time spent with student teams. It is up to the initiating professor to be able to frame a discussion asking a potential client for the opportunity to help them. This discussion may include the following:

#### **Focus On Client**

1. Do you have problems or opportunities that you have been wanting to look at but do not have the time or resources to address?
2. If I can have two to four teams, that I supervise, look for solutions to your problems, would you be willing to allow us to help you?
3. You will not get one team of professional consultants looking at your problem. You will get soon-to-be professionals, with multiple teams all looking at the same problem.
4. As there is a range of students and skill levels in each team, multiple teams will have the advantage of providing nuggets of information to help you with your decision-making.
5. The value of allowing our students to work with you is that you will receive X\$ worth of consulting. This is not what you are paying. It is what you would have to pay if you were being charged. How do I arrive at that figure? 4 students x 20 hours per week x 8 weeks x \$10 per hour = \$6400 per team x 4 teams ~ 25,000 worth of consulting services that you do not have to pay for. Now consider if this were a professional consulting firm the hourly rate would be between \$25 to \$125 per hour and only one team. It should be noted a number of universities charge their clients. In 1992, The Thunderbird School in Glendale, Arizona charged \$25,000 per team.
6. There is also a recruiting value to you. You will have the opportunity to see students make a presentation to your firm. There may one or two you like. This provides you a "free sample" of work. Ideally, it may lead to an internship or future employment with your firm.

7. Time Commitment: You (the client) will need to meet with the teams (collectively on site or via Skype) for a few hours to charge the teams with the problem. You will need to provide some background information and reports. Disguising data and information is acceptable. You will need to be available two hours each week for a video conference call.

#### Focus On Faculty Member

1. I will learn the knowledge base of our students. What they know and how they can help. This may include gathering information (primary – secondary data to build a data source to analyze) synthesizing information, finding patterns, brainstorming and testing new ideas, etc.
2. I will be providing the same information to you that I will provide students. This will include an outline, a list of readings, a list of questions, and an example shell documents to frame their work and final written deliverables to you. This will also include an example of a final oral presentation to you.
3. I will provide some short lectures to students on the overall process of consulting and providing advice.
4. I gather a list of students, their majors and company interests before going abroad.
5. I will form teams based on student expertise and the needs of the client.
6. I will meet with the teams every other day in country.
7. I will secure an office, lab, or class room space that has adequate internet connectivity.

#### Focus on Students

1. Students will select from a list of potential clients, (there may be only one to begin with) they would like to work for. If there is more than one, students rank order their client.
2. Students will have office time every day from 8 to 1 to work on their consulting project.
3. At the end of every day, students provide a to-do action item list for the next day.
4. At the end of every week a final status report is sent to the faculty member.
5. At the half-way mark, a preliminary report is provided to the faculty member.
6. At the completion of the project a written report is presented to the client. An oral presentation is made in person or via Skype.
7. A final evaluation is requested from client on the project, faculty involvement, student presentations, and overall value of the effort asking client to put an overall dollar value on what they were given.

Like most things in life, once you go through the process of delivering a consulting class abroad, it gets easier and the overall benefits to all concerned are well worth the effort.

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