MBA 629B – CREATING AND SUSTAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Spring 2010
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Required Texts: None

Purpose: MBA 629B is a capstone experience in which student teams complete large-scale projects with Piedmont North Carolina organizations. Depending on the nature of the project, students should be prepared to:

1. Develop a strategic/business plan that reflects an understanding of how to integrate the development, operations, and marketing of goods and services in a global setting that can be successfully implemented in the client’s current business environment.

2. Identify funds requirements and design financing plans to support an organization’s strategic business plan.

3. Indicate how the ethical, legal, regulatory, social, political, tax and economic context in which the organization functions influences the project’s recommendations.

4. Indicate the contributions made by the human resource function, including how the management of change and cultural diversity affects the recommendations.

5. Work as a team to gather, organize, interpret, analyze and use information to formulate strategic alternatives for the organization, and to choose from among these alternatives.

6. Communicate the results of their recommendations both orally and in writing.

Course Requirements: Final grades are based on a final report, an oral presentation to the client, client evaluation and peer evaluations. The relative weights we will give to each component is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Report</td>
<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client Evaluation</td>
<td>200</td>
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The grading scale is as follows:

- A > 900
- A - > 866
- B > 833
- B - > 766
- C + > 766
- C > 700
- F < 699

The final report is the most important component of your grade because it represents a permanent record of the group’s activities. Although the reports content of will depend on the nature of the project, each report must contain an executive summary of no more than three pages that indicates your key recommendations, as well as a brief outline of your reasoning. The executive summary should appear at the beginning of the paper. Your recommendations must be data-driven. Beyond this, reports should communicate a sense of literacy. It is impossible to take your policy recommendations seriously if the reader comes across numerous typos, misspellings and poor grammar. Please put your paper (and drafts of your paper!) through the spelling and grammar checks before sending it to your instructors.

NOTE: PLEASE BE AWARE THAT YOU ARE LIKELY TO BE OPERATING UNDER CLIENT SECRECY REQUIREMENTS; THEREFORE, THE PRIOR YEAR’S REPORTS MUST BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

Each group must make a formal presentation of their results/recommendations to the client organization. Since graduation is on Friday, May 14th, the presentation should be made no later than the week of May 3rd. Actually, your instructors will strongly prefer that presentations be done before May 3rd, if possible. Groups that have not completed the final report and made their presentation to the client by 5:00PM on May 7th will receive an Incomplete. While you will be able to ‘walk at graduation,’ your degree will not be awarded until a quality product is delivered to the client. Professional presentations using PowerPoint for visuals aids; handouts must be used where appropriate.

Your instructors will evaluate the final reports and oral presentations. In addition, a representative of the client organization will evaluate your efforts based on how well you have addressed the core issues, the quality of your recommendations, and on the professionalism of your presentation. Keep in mind that perception is reality. What a client believes about how you have conducted yourself during the project will affect this component of your grade.

Finally, successful completion of a high quality paper/presentation requires much work and cooperation across team members. We will not tolerate ‘free riders;’ i.e. group members who do nothing and expect others to carry them. For this reason, your team members, as well as the supervising faculty member will determine a portion of your grade based on their assessment of your contribution to the project’s success. The peer evaluation will be quite formal; faculty assessment while less structured will cover the same basic elements of the peer evaluation. It is entirely possible that some group members could receive an A for MBA 629B
while others could get a C. You will receive a copy of the peer evaluation form as a separate Word document.

To ensure that there are no misunderstandings related to the peer and faculty evaluation, we will conduct a preliminary at mid-semester. No grades will be assigned; instead, our intent is to communicate the results on an exception basis when corrective action becomes necessary. Final peer evaluations will take place two weeks before the end of the semester. Some students may be uncomfortable with placing such a weight on what many may consider a subjective factor. Welcome to the real world! Over the course of your professional careers, your progress will be based on what people think of the contribution you have make to project and/or organizational goals. In this setting, perception is reality! The weight placed on peer evaluation mirrors this reality. It has been your instructors’ experience that team members are generally fair, and reward effort and hard work. People who just go through the motions and disappear at the end the project get their just rewards.

A Final Note: As one of the last classes in the MBA Program, MBA 629B serves as a way for the faculty to assess how well we are achieving overall Program learning objectives. In addition to the peer evaluations that measure leadership and inter-personal skills, there are two other forms that measure oral and written communication skills, as well as the degree to which individuals/groups demonstrate critical reasoning. We will share copies of these documents in electronic form by the end of October.

The Project Assignment Process and Timelines

- Students will be sent a list of available projects no later than the first week in October; identify your top three choices and forward them to your instructors within two weeks.
- Your instructors will meet with the Associate Director of the MBA Program, as well as a representative of Graduate Career Services to ensure the best fit of project requirements, student skills, and career objectives. Team assignments will be made after fall break.
- A meeting of the entire group will take place shortly after fall break to talk about instructor expectations, project planning and alike. For convenience, we will probably schedule a luncheon meeting. Attendance at this meeting is not optional!
- Site visits with your instructor will begin during the first week in November. By the end of November, teams should have a clearly defined project plan in the form of a Gantt Chart. In all likelihood, details will change as the team gets into the project. The Gantt Chart should be updated weekly and a copy sent to your instructor.
- Each group should appoint a project coordinator. This person will serve as the communication link between the group, the client and your faculty advisors. Select this person early in the life of the project.
- Teams should plan on meeting weekly to review progress from the prior week, and to set the agenda for the coming week. Attendance at these meetings is mandatory. Your instructors will attend the weekly meeting as requested.
- Shortly after spring break, all team members will submit peer evaluations. As noted in the description of course requirements, results will be communicated to team members’ individually and where necessary, corrective action taken.
• The class as a whole will meet from noon until 4:00PM on Monday, April 5th. At that time, each team will make a mini-presentation (interpret as no more than 20 minutes) on their project to the entire group. Creative inputs to other teams’ efforts are not only welcomed, but also encouraged.
• Your instructor must review/edit all reports and presentations before they go to the clients.

TIPS FOR A GREAT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The keys to success are early engagement in the project, planning, teamwork and a commitment to excellence. This is the capstone experience in the program and the quality of your work may get you a job with the client, or serve as evidence of a successful completion of an assignment to a prospective employer. Some specifics:

• Once you get into the details of the project, there may be some minor changes in either its nature or scope. It is not unusual for this to occur. However, get in touch with your faculty advisors quickly if serious issues arise with the client about the scope of the project. We are in the best position to resolve these honest differences in perception.
• A rule of thumb is that graduate students should spend 2-3 hours a week for every hour of class time. While MBA 629B has no formal meeting time, it is a three credit-hour course; therefore, plan on devoting between 9-12 hours a week on the project. With proper planning, teams can bring a large number of hours to bear on any given project.
• Your instructors recognize and respect the fact that many students have graduate assistantships or work part-time to finance their education. Having said that, we are in an environment in where meeting client expectations are our #1 priority. Students would be ill advised to attempt to hold down a graduate assistantship, work 20-30 hours a week on a part-time job and take 12 graduate credit hours.
• Begin writing your final report no later than April 1st, 2010 starting with a detailed outline. You may not have completed all of your data collection or analysis, but you can add these as you flesh out the report. Note: Your instructors will request interim reviews of drafts. Most of the reports done in the spring of 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 were over 100 pages long with exhibits. No report will go out to a ‘client’ unless it is professional work. Not only must the content address the issues in a thorough manner, but must also look like it is coming from a consulting firm that bills its time at $300-$500 an hour.

Finally, there is a need to recognize that a successful project can contribute to building the value of the Bryan MBA brand. As daytime MBA programs go, we are the new kids on the block and MBA 629B gives you the opportunity to demonstrate that you are as good as any MBAs from higher-profile programs. The classes of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 have all turned in outstanding projects – now it is your turn!