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Delivering an Experiential Immersion Course to Enhance MBA Retention Rates, Achieve Understanding and Support for Institutional Missions and Values, and Hone Practical Skills in Applied Leadership

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Abstract

This article shares our experiences at Seattle University with a 16-year-old program that dramatically raises MBA student retention rates, conveys and achieves alignment with institutional values and mission goals, and develops interpersonal leadership skills that immediately enhance our students' effectiveness in their current work lives. Legacy benefits include an estimated \$16.2 million in incremental tuition revenues over this 16-year period, with no offsetting incremental expenses, and 16 years of loyal MBA alumni who identify emotionally with both our university, with our business school, and with their many fellow alumni with whom they otherwise would not have developed a collegial connection.

Before

We begin with a snapshot of the MBA experience at Seattle University in 1996. By then I had taught in the program for over 20 years and had a pretty good sense for the experience we were offering our MBA clientele. We were, as we are today, a predominantly part-time program serving working professionals. Our students were drawn from the largely engineering industrial base that dominates the Puget Sound employment environment, with Boeing being the largest of the numerous engineering companies that comprise the mix of organizations whose employees were our MBA program clients.

Our MBA students would arrive at Seattle University after a full day's work, sit for three hours in a classroom filled with colleagues they would never know, and after three years would leave the program with a degree and a vague recollection of the faces that shared their classroom space the past three years. They would leave without a collegial network of fellow MBA alumni; without memories of supportive, collegial relationships and

experiences; and without a strong attachment to, or identification with, Seattle University. And those were the success stories. Over a third of new MBA students would leave before completing their first year, with nothing but memories of a failed experiment in graduate business education at Seattle University. And nearly a fifth of those remaining after the first year would never see graduation day.

I got to know many of those students. They were accomplished, professional, collegial, and, in short, the kind of people I would want to have in my professional network. And I saw an enormous loss for them and for our program because they never became connected with each other. The structure and priorities of our program just did not create or accommodate an environment where our graduate students got to know each other and form close, meaningful relationships with which to build a network comprised of their fellow MBA alumni. In other words, they were deprived of achieving one of the most important legacy values of an MBA experience – a strong, supportive, and lasting network of alumni colleagues.¹

And what were we getting from this deal? We were getting a growing alumni body of invisible MBAs who felt little allegiance to or affection for our school or our university. The desks at local businesses were increasingly being occupied by SU graduates who had, at best, mild enthusiasm for our program – at a time when we needed their energetic and rave reviews to convince their colleagues that we were a preferable, albeit high-cost, alternative to other local MBA options. In short, we needed happy alumni who were eagerly promoting our MBA program to their work colleagues. And, we needed happy alumni who were willing and eager to support our program with their time, their continuing interest, their allegiance, and, yes, their contributions.

If I were the CEO of this scenario in 1993, looking at painful attrition rates, forfeited tuition revenues, and the enormous loss to our students from their not becoming connected to each other, I would be banging my head against the wall – and maybe some other heads. This was a prime opportunity to do something, to change, and to mitigate this enormous opportunity loss.

And then ...

In the fall of 1996 we began offering a required MBA core course entitled *Leadership and Team Development* with the expectation that new MBA students would take the course in their first or second quarter in the program. The course was delivered using an experiential regimen that included many of the components of outdoor experiential-based training (OEBT) that had become popular in corporate training venues and was achieving impressive measurable results.² The course was the outgrowth of an experimental course launched in the summer of 1993, entitled *Introduction to Adventure-Based Training*, that had achieved an enthusiastic following and impressive course evaluations. In order to assess the potential of this prototype experience to affect retention rates by connecting students to each other, we measured before and after cohesion variables for the 48 students comprising the two

sections of the course, and compared these to a control group of students enrolled in other courses that summer. The results were encouraging. Before-and-after cohesion variables showed statistically significant positive changes in all four cohesion variables (at the .000 level): group trust, group awareness, group effectiveness, and interpersonal communications.³ These data, along with positive course evaluations, provided the impetus for the new core course.

After four years experience offering *Leadership and Team Development* as a required MBA course, we looked at student retention rates for the four years prior to implementation of the required course compared to retention rates after the course was required. We specifically looked at “first year” retention rates (the rate of retention after the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd quarters in the program) and included 100 percent of new MBA student enrollments from fall quarter 1992 through summer quarter 2000, thereby measuring first-year retention experience for the 16 quarters prior to and the 16 quarters subsequent to the new course requirement.

For all MBA students beginning from the fall of 1996 on, the first-year retention rate increased by 16.1 percent during the first four years of requiring *Leadership and Team Development*. For students taking the new course in their first quarter in the program, the improvement in retention was 22.6 percent during the first four years.⁴ We estimated \$2.72 million incremental tuition revenue during those first 16 quarters just from enhanced retention, an amount that would have eclipsed \$3.84 million had we required that the course be taken in each student’s first quarter in the program. If we assume a similar retention performance subsequent to the measurement period, along with our changing tuition structure, the gain in tuition revenue today would be \$4.07 million over each ensuing four-year period, or \$5.75 million had the course been required in the first quarter for each student. Extrapolating forward to 2012, we estimate that over \$16.28 million in incremental revenue has been achieved since the course

was implemented in 1996, and that this incremental revenue could have been (and should have been!) over \$23 million had we required that the course be taken in each student's first quarter.

Considering the benefits today

We now have 16 years of experience with *Leadership and Team Development*, and those 16 years offer multiple observations and conclusions that go beyond the dramatic impact this requirement has had on our bottom line. To begin with, retention is a much more important variable than just a spigot for more revenue. It is the most reliable surrogate for measuring student satisfaction for the services we are providing. Why would just one required course lead to such a dramatic gain in overall student satisfaction? The answers go to the impact that the course has on collegiality, on developing and deepening relationships within the program clientele, and on the unintended consequence of building loyalty to Seattle University.

Students in a traditional professional MBA program – that is, a program that serves predominantly full-time working professionals – are juggling MBA studies with work, family, recreation, and social responsibilities. It's a juggling act that often requires prioritizing which balls to keep in the air, and which to drop. If an MBA program is not delivering on all of its hopes and promises – if, in a nutshell, it isn't worth the tradeoffs in work and family sacrifices – it can easily be the ball to drop. Historically, part-time MBA students suffer high attrition rates, eclipsing 50 percent in some programs.⁵ One of the benefits that is rarely well-developed in a part-time environment is collegiality – the gaining of a network of mutually supportive relationships that both make the MBA experience more palatable, even enjoyable, and that endure long after graduation. Indeed, the nurturing of long-term supportive professional contacts and friendships is often cited as one of the most important legacy outcomes of an MBA program, especially in part-time programs where most of the program clients will spend

their working careers in close proximity to each other, often in the same cities and with employers that offer potential opportunities for the extended network of MBA alumni.⁶

What is it about *Leadership and Team Development* that produces close, supportive, collegial relationships that make MBA studies more palatable and that also offer post-MBA benefits? Following is a brief, admittedly incomplete, discussion of what happens in the course and how it changes the MBA experience at Seattle University.

Producing critical outcomes

Leadership and Team Development delivers student experiences that are challenging, intense, and visceral. The course is anchored by a three-day weekend retreat that fosters a sense of shared destiny and shared challenge, and has a visceral component that brings people together in ways that are meaningful, collegial, and permanent. It creates connections that are intimate, transparent, and mutually supportive. Participants regard each other as close friends before the course is over – close friends, in this case, that they will be sharing class time and social time with over the remainder of their MBA programs. The campus atmosphere that welcomes our MBA students each evening is starkly different today than it was in the years before requiring this course experience. Today it is marked by gatherings of close friends, rather than lone students rushing to and from classes. Indeed, one of the collective testimonials that led to the creation of the course as an “intake course” (i.e., to be taken early if not first in the program requirements) came from pre-1996 students who had taken the prototype *Introduction to Adventure-Based Training*. In their evaluations of that course experience, a common paraphrase was “*Now I have 25 close friends in the program, and it's my FINAL QUARTER. Why didn't this happen when I started the program three years ago, so that I could have shared my MBA studies with best friends?*” This recurring sentiment was a telling message that persuaded us to further develop the precursor course and to add it as a requirement in the 1996 revision of the MBA

program (now two revisions ago – and the key lynchpin from one program to the next).

The intimate connections and spirit of community that deliver the aforementioned benefits do not manifest by accident. *Leadership and Team Development* delivers very intentional experiences that require interpersonal struggles and, to some extent, shared discomforts – physical exertion, fear, conflict, and hardship. We know from the literature on group bonding that intense, visceral experiences connect people in ways that nothing else does – this is the primary psycho-social methodology behind military basic training programs.⁷ It also suffuses the methodology of programs like Outward Bound, where participants are taken into the wilderness where the elements and unpredictable experiences teach an inevitable variety of lessons, as well as create strong visceral connections among participants.⁸

In an MBA program we don't enjoy the luxury of waiting for weather changes and human conflict to eventually deliver lasting lessons in a two-week foray into the mountains. We need to make something happen quickly, predictably, and economically – during one weekend sandwiched between several on-campus meetings. And we must manage the range of discomfort and stress during the weekend retreat, with obvious constraints that Outward Bound is free from. But we can do it -- and we do, indeed, do it -- in ways that offer relative and sufficient assurance of physical, emotional, and psychological safety.

The course also requires a ten-hour service-learning project that group members engage in together. Aside from the obvious benefits to a group of graduate students from sourcing a meaningful service project and committing themselves to work together to address undermet community needs, the service experience provides a platform for discussing the broader mission and values of our university: our commitment to the community, our caring about issues of justice, our caring about each other, our active concern for what happens in the spaces around our university campus.

And for most projects now, it offers an opportunity to consider and support the Seattle University Youth Initiative, which commits all of us to changing in a substantive way the outcomes in elementary, middle, and secondary education within a defined inner-city boundary established by the elementary school closest to our campus.⁹

The expectation of community service itself brings our MBA students together and helps create a sense of identity with each other and with the university, and, perhaps surprisingly, garners enthusiastic support and approbation from the students themselves, who might otherwise question why they are paying onerous tuition in order to give their time to serving our community. Almost 93 percent (92.9%) of our MBA students agree or strongly agree to the statement “a community service project should remain a requirement for MBA 510 (this is the course number).” Almost 97 percent (96.9%) believe that “a community service requirement is an appropriate way for Seattle University to express its commitment to educating students for service.” And almost 84 percent (83.6%) agree or strongly agree with the statement “working together with other graduate students in a community service experience enhanced my personal sense of connection to Seattle University.”¹⁰

How different are we today?

I have the benefit of 40 years of hindsight at Seattle University, hindsight that includes the MBA environment from 1973 until 1996, and the MBA environment from 1996 until today. From 1995 until 2009 I served as MBA Program Director. Trust me, there is no comparison between the before and after 1996 MBA environments. Let me relate this to two recent experiences.

On May 13, 2012, I returned home from a long weekend retreat with 38 MBA students. This retreat was not part of the course we are focused on in this article, but from an advanced elective course that we call *Adventure-Based Leadership*. The retreat experience included camping at Tumwater

Campground near Leavenworth, Washington, rock climbing at Barney's Rubble in the Icicle Canyon, engaging student-created and student-led group initiative problems at the campground, and addressing inter-personal challenges in a "Learning through Conflict" seminar that anchors the course experiences. We slept in tents – definitely not something we would have our students do in a required course like *Leadership and Team Development*.

On Saturday evening the 38 participants gathered about the campfire to debrief and make meaning from their rock climbing experiences. The camp chairs they sat on could have been lifted from tail-gating parties for college football games – none, obviously, from Seattle University, where football is only played with flags and on intramural fields! There were at least four chairs sporting the purple and gold logo of the Washington Husky, two the crimson and gray Cougar of Washington State, one the green and yellow Duck of Oregon, and one the cardinal and gold Trojan of USC. None of this struck me as unusual. What I did find unusual and noteworthy – perhaps because I retain a vivid memory of our pre-1996 MBAs -- was that nearly half the campers were wearing Seattle University apparel: hooded sweatshirts, t-shirts, and ball caps.

During my first 23 years at Seattle University this scene would have been unimaginable. I don't recall any MBA students from 1973 to 1996 wearing SU sportswear, or, for that matter, exhibiting anything that would even hint that they were part of an academic program on my campus. And, of course, prior to 1996, there would have been no MBA students choosing to take a course that involved a three-day camping retreat in Eastern Washington. Nor would there have been any gathering of 38 MBA colleagues who knew each other by name, and knew each other as friends.

The other experience culminated on Friday evening, May 18, 2012, when over 200 graduate business students, faculty, and staff gathered at a neighborhood watering hole to raise funds to support expansion of an

elementary school in Kigali, Rwanda. The school was founded by one of our MBA alumni, Fr. Jean-Baptiste Ganza, S.J., who returned to Rwanda to run and expand the school after his graduation in June of 2012. As I looked over the celebration I thought about how much we had changed and how far we had come. I knew most of the students in attendance. More important, they knew each other. They exuded an obvious affection for each other – a delight in being in each other's presence. And, yes, they shared a common affection for Seattle University and for the environment that brought them together. Finally – on this evening – they raised over \$20,000 for the Saint Ignatius School in Kigali, Rwanda, where Hutu and Tutsi children learn together in post-genocide Rwanda.¹¹

Transcending academic politics

If you are like other audiences with whom I have shared the story of *Leadership and Team Development*, then you are probably thinking: "This could never happen at our university. The management faculty would never approve it." So how difficult was it for an accounting professor (that's what I was in 1996) to effectively promote an experiential leadership course to the management faculty? And get it approved as a required course in the MBA program?

I won't pretend it was a cake walk. I will suggest it was a lot easier than you might imagine. To begin with, I had some experience as an outdoor experiential trainer, and I believed in the efficacy of the methodology. Furthermore, I saw a natural and important application to our MBA curriculum. As discussed earlier, I got things started by offering an experimental course during a summer quarter (of 1993), when the costs of offering a course at Seattle University are a fraction of the normal school-year budget (basically we are all paid like glorified adjunct professors in the summer). The course demand was strong and my first offering grew to two sections. Both sections yielded very positive course evaluations, enthusiastic enough to create a "buzz" among

our MBA students. That “buzz” infected the imagination of my colleagues and created the deserved impression that the course, if offered as an “intake” requirement in the MBA program, would benefit the program, enhance our enrollments, fuel a steady-state increase in the size of the program, and yield positive effects for all of us. The course was rightly seen as benefitting everyone and everything – our students, our enrollments, our finances, our reputation, and our job security. That reality helped to cut through the otherwise impenetrable paralysis of normal academic politics.

In two words, the course was *good business*. At the very foundation of our expectations as business school professors – and as curriculum architects – is the expectation that we model good business practices. When we have a clear opportunity to substantially enhance the value of our client services, at zero incremental financial investment, we are under a professional duty to seize that opportunity. To their credit, my colleagues understood this. And their approval and support dramatically changed the MBA experience at Seattle University.

And yet – still opportunity lost!

Inexplicably, we still do not require new MBA students to take *Leadership and Team Development* in their first quarter. I say inexplicably because we have compelling data to support just how much we are losing by this act of illogical omission. For every 100 new MBA students who *do not* take *Leadership and Team Development* in their first quarter, an average 19.1 will be gone after the first quarter. For every 100 new students who *do* take it in their first quarter, an average 5.1 will be gone after the first quarter. These data make our reluctance to require the course in the first quarter absolutely incredulous to me – and I presume to you who are reading this.

Let me put this in terms that every dollar-wise reader can understand. For every 100 new students who wait to take *Leadership and Team Development*, 19.1 are gone by the second

quarter, compared to the 5.1 who would be gone either way – hence we lose an incremental 14 students paying \$778 per credit hour in a program ranging from 49 to 73 credit hours to complete. At the average length of the program, we lose over \$45,000 for every student who leaves after the first quarter, hence an estimated \$630,000 for every 100 students who do not begin their program with *Leadership and Team Development*.

Student attrition is not just a vaguely interesting statistic. It represents, in our case, an enormous financial loss. Below is my last attempt, conveyed in an email to my dean in 2010, to inveigh against what I see as inexplicable recalcitrance in the face of overwhelming data. I substitute current tuition rates for timely relevance:

MBA 510 Data (Leadership and Team Development) For 8 Quarters Ending Spring 2010

Total New Students	551	100%
Taking 510 in 1 st qtr.	290	52.63%
Not taking 510 in 1 st qtr.	261	47.36%

Incremental 1st quarter attrition rate based on Weis/Prussia study:

Taking 510	5.1 %	Attrition Rate
Not taking 510	19.1 %	Attrition Rate
	4.0 %	Incremental Attrition

Hence for the 8 quarters ending spring 2010, we lost an incremental 37 students over what we would have lost had those 261 students taken 510 in their 1st quarter. If we assume that the average loss in credits taken from those 37 students would be around 60 credits, then our lost tuition revenue from not starting all MBA’s in 510, for this 2-year period, would approximate \$1.73 million (37 X 60 X \$778 per credit hour = \$1,727,160). That would be lost revenue over the period that those students would have been in the program. I don’t know what it is about hard, compelling data that earns it such a place of irrelevance in academic planning and policy circles. I do know this. I wouldn’t want our MBA students, who come to us to learn good

business practices, to discover this memo as a case study in making bad business decisions!

And in conclusion!

Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) since 1992, attributes the stratospheric rise of UMBC's science and math reputation to consciously and intentionally building supportive cohorts in its celebrated Meyerhoff Scholars Program. The 72-member cohorts begin their academic program with a "boot camp" designed to "form real bonds" and learn "how to work together" – to foster a spirit of "collaboration, not competition." The result: members of the cohort stay together – and they excel together. And they attribute their personal successes to the environment of mutual support and collaboration that is a mainstay of the Meyerhoff program.¹²

The addition of *Leadership and Team Development* to our MBA curriculum has employed a similar philosophy, and has been a resounding win-win proposition. The results have been a dramatic increase in retention rates, an MBA student body and alumni body who identify strongly with Seattle University and embrace its mission and values, and a course offering that conveys immediately applicable leadership and management skills.

Having written this, I am not naïve to the institutional politics and academic hubris that may make this entire discussion seem beyond the pale of possibility – "pie in the sky" rumination about a curriculum experiment from dreamland. Despite the evidence pointing to elevated client satisfaction, elevated steady-state program size, and elevated revenues and margins, the introduction of even a single course that promises these windfalls may be beyond the stretch of academic imagination, elasticity, and inertia.

And – maybe not. Our hard-nose business critics like to poke us with "academia is where the rubber meets the sky." And while our own self-perception thinks the opposite, that "academia is where the rubber meets the

water," there is that possibility that our business critics are right. In this case – we can hope. 

Notes

¹ William L. Weis, "Which MBA Program? Career and Personal Benefits: Enduring and Ephemeral," *International Graduate*, Summer (2001).

² T.T. Baldwin, R.J. Wagner and C.C. Roland, "Effects of Outdoor Challenge Training on Group and Individual Perceptions," *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, St. Louis, MO, 1991; B.L. Thompson, "Training in the Great Outdoors," *Training* 28, no. 5 (1991): 46-52; R.J. Wagner and C.C. Roland, "How Effective Is Outdoor Training?" *Training & Development* 46, no. 7 (1992): 61-66; R.J. Wagner and D. Fahey, "An Empirical Evaluation of a Corporate Outdoor-Based Training Program," Paper presented at the Midwest Academy of Management Annual Meeting, 1992; R.J. Wagner and R. Weigand, "How Effective Is Outdoor-Based Training in Improving Management Behaviors: A Healthcare Application," *Journal of Healthcare Education and Training* 7, no. 3 (1993): 1-4.

³ R.J. Wagner, W. L. Weis and M. Mostad, "Adventure-Based Training as an MBA Elective Course: Evaluating One Model," Unpublished manuscript for Seattle University, 1994.

⁴ William L. Weis and Gregory Prussia, "Enhancing Student Cohesion and Retention through an Outdoor Experiential Training Program," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 7, no. 1 (2003): 27-36

⁵ Gregory Prussia and William L. Weis, "Experiential Learning Effects on Retention: Results from a Required MBA Course," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice* 5, no. 4 (2003-2004): 397-407.

⁶ Weis, "Which MBA Program?"; William L. Weis, "Competing in the Part-Time MBA Market," *MBAR Journal* 1, no. 1 (2000): 29-34.

⁷ R.R. Vickers, M.T. Wallick, and L.K. Hervig, *The Marine Corps Basic Training Experience: Stresses, Leadership, and Group Cohesion as Predictors of Attitudes, Health, and Performance* (San Diego: Naval Health Research Center, 1982).

⁸ Steven Bacon, *The Conscious Use of Metaphor in Outward Bound* (Denver: Colorado Outward Bound School, 1983).

⁹ Seattle University, "Seattle University Youth Initiative," Accessed June 14, 2012, <http://www.seattleu.edu/suyi/>.

¹⁰ William L. Weis, "Service Learning in Business Curricula: Walking the Talk," *NSEE Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2000): 11-16; William L. Weis, "Enriching Business Education through Community Service," *Business Education Forum* 55, no. 1 (2000): 25-26.

¹¹ M. Zazycki, "SU's Mission in Action," *SU Voice*, Accessed June 14, 2012, <http://www.seattleu.edu/alumni/suvoice/BlogPost.aspx?id=93521>.

¹² CBS, "Hrabowski: An Educator Focused on Math and Science," In *60 Minutes*, June 17, 2012.

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APPENDIX

WE CAN HELP – AND WOULD LIKE TO!

Even if you are convinced by this article of the positive effects such a program can deliver, you no doubt are hesitant, if not paralyzed, by the seemingly daunting obstacles to getting something similar started in your MBA program. So – we want to help!

In the spirit of professional courtesy among our Jesuit MBA affiliates, I would be more than happy to run a pilot course in your program. Given the somewhat complicated logistics demanded of this kind of course, on its first offering, I would suggest a class schedule on weekend days. We currently run the course in five, 3 ½ hour on-campus meetings, plus a weekend retreat commencing at 1:00 pm on Friday and ending by 5:00 pm on Sunday – hence another 28 hours of contact time at the retreat, not counting sleeping hours (we usually have discussion assignments while dining). We have also offered the entire course on weekends. It works well in that format.

We hold our retreats at rustic camp/conference facilities that have grounds that accommodate a range of OEBT activities. We usually have up to two other trainers working with me in delivering the retreat experiences, and usually one other person helping with my on-campus meetings. We have been partnering since the start of this course with a consulting group, *Teams & Leaders*, that specializes in experiential training using OEBT models and whose consultants have extensive training and experience with Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership School, Project Adventure, and other recognized pioneering organizations in OEBT. It would be no problem bringing with me someone who has helped me deliver the course experience multiple times over the years.

I realize this is beginning to sound like an especially complicated delivery system, but it is really quite easy once the course gains traction. We have current and former MBA students who help in delivering this experience – a trained cohort of very competent and dedicated individuals.

As part of this offering to your program, we would invite all interested management faculty in your organization to join us and to be trained to deliver the course. We would also facilitate finding a suitable retreat venue, as well as trained support personnel to assist in delivering the OEBT components of the program. In the interim we would gladly assist through the first several iterations of the course, using *Teams and Leaders* personnel to support your faculty until they feel comfortable with the delivery system. At present at Seattle University we have three regular management faculty members who deliver the course, as well as one adjunct professor. We use several consultants from *Teams and Leaders* on a regular basis, usually with one supporting each section of the course.

I know this sounds a bit daunting, but believe me it isn't. Given our background and experience in both delivering the course and in training people to support and deliver the course, this would amount to a "turn-key" operation for your program. If you are a non-cohort professional MBA program, and if you track your student retention rates – which I hope you do – I will personally guarantee a minimum 20 percent increase in retention for those starting your program with our experiential course. Yes – that's a guarantee.