



Brandeis University

**CONSULTING FIELD PROJECTS
BUS 295A**

COURSE SYLLABUS

Spring 2012

**Full-Class Hours: Tuesday, 2:00 - 3:30 PM
Team Meetings at Appointed Times**

Sachar, Chancellor's Suite (1st floor)

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Office Hours: Tuesday & Friday 9:00-11:00

Course Objectives

Students will deliver high-impact projects for Boston-area operating companies by working in a team of four to help a senior client executive respond to a real business challenge. Students will:

- Learn and demonstrate the capabilities required to conduct a successful internal or external consulting project: managing the project, building client relationship and developing a high-impact presentation
- Improve analytical skills: data analysis, survey management, Internet research and financial analysis
- Work effectively as consulting team
- Address a significant client problem from framing the issue through final presentation

This course is challenging both in the skills it demands students to learn and also in the time commitment for independent research, readings, team meetings, client meetings and meetings with the professor. In return, students will be able to showcase for potential recruiters a project that produced significant measurable results for an operating company. In addition, students will have built skill and confidence in working as a team and with a client

Prerequisites

- Previous work experience as an intern or employee
- At least 2 graduate-level Business courses in any two of the following: Marketing or Sales, Accounting, Org Behavior/HR/Leadership, Operations, Strategy, or Finance
- Students must be fully conversant in English, and able to conduct interviews, survey research and presentations at a level commensurate with the expectations of a real-world US consulting firm (this is a much higher expectation than typical classroom participation.)

Course Plan

Students will participate in teams to conduct projects for real business or non-profit organizations. Projects will be challenging, yet of a size and scope to be accomplished in three-and-a-half months. The projects will involve a variety of client challenges and opportunities, such as those involving:

- Market development
- Organizational effectiveness
- Financial planning and analysis
- Production and logistics management

Sponsoring organizations will range in size from small, locally-based companies to larger multi-region companies. Student's work will involve independent and team research including both on-site work at client organizations and external research. The amount of on-site involvement in a client organization will depend on the nature of the project

Most projects will require conducting interviews with internal and external parties, sometimes with minimal or no introductions. Accordingly, English language skills and the willingness to contact and interview strangers via telephone or in person are important for the success of the projects

The work will largely include four types of activity:

- Weekly full-class or team meeting of 1½ hours, at the prescribed time. During this time, teams will work together and with the professor on building consulting skills and the general tools of analysis. This will not only leverage what other teams learn, but allow students insight into the other teams' issues and approaches
- Client update by phone or Skype at least every two weeks. The team will conduct these meetings at a mutually agreed time, to assure that the client is deeply involved in the project. Most teams

will conduct at least one of these updates at the site, in addition to the kickoff and final presentation meetings

- Team updates and meetings. Each team member should update the team daily on project progress. Then the team should meet at least weekly to integrate and synthesize findings
- Individual work – the core of the project will be completion of individual tasks prepared in preparation for team meetings

Text

Consulting is a skill. Students will be expected to develop their abilities to develop, execute and manage a consulting project. The text will provide the framework for that aspect of the course learning: Friga, P, *The McKinsey Engagement*, 2009, McGraw Hill

Team Assignments

Students will be asked which projects they would like to participate. However, they will be assigned to teams, in a manner that optimizes the teams for client performance. This is more accommodating than a real-world consulting firm, in which research associates usually have no input into the projects they work on

Grading

Grades will be by team. Grade will be based on the instructor's assessment of team performance after discussion with the client. Individual grades may be adjusted up or down from the team's if there is a clear difference in performance or if class participation is below expectation. This course will not have any tests

Client Impact

- Projects will provide highly-valuable client assistance. Recommendations will address key strategic issues the client faces. The recommendations will be significant – that is, they will represent substantial opportunities for the client to change direction and achieve higher profit
- Projects will project annual *top* and *bottom* line impact potential from the recommendations. Thus, recommendations will describe and estimate both revenue and cost impacts
- Each project will address not only *what* is recommended, but *how* the client can implement the recommendations – recommendations should reflect a solid understanding of the client's organizational capabilities

Research Method

- Team pushes hard and deep by collecting and analyzing key data that sheds new light on clients' issues and opportunities. This includes conducting interviews, a survey, creating databases, preparing comprehensive analyses, finding valuable reports, and other non-trivial research efforts. Relying exclusively on Google searches will be judged to be a minimal effort
- Project work plan documented and reviewed in advance
- The project work addresses each of the T E A M * F O C U S aspects described in the text
- Data approach includes both secondary (e.g. review of other studies) and primary (e.g. original survey) data development
- Project includes rigorous analysis. This could be statistical or qualitative

- Presentation documents separately: findings, conclusions and recommendations
- Financial modeling proficiency: A number of projects each semester call for developing financial models. I expect that students know how to create Excel models for income and expense statements, cash flow projections, return calculations, sensitivity analysis

Client interaction

- Weekly written client updates
- Client interactions at least every other week, and ideally weekly
- On-sight client meetings at least 4 times during the project
- Client project evaluation

Team work

- Team members collaborate and split up the work on an equitable basis. Team members have clear responsibilities, documented in the Project Charter
- Teams work together every week, in addition to individual work
- Individuals evaluate the team process. Dysfunctional teams will be graded lower, and free riders will receive lower grades than their team mates

Milestones

- Submits each deliverable on time
- Meets as a team with the instructor at the appointed time (about every other week) and responds appropriately to instructor input
- Steady work pace: Teams must start their work early in the semester and sustain a steady work pace throughout. Work pace will be judged by a master work plan and a weekly progress review. Cramming at the end of the semester will inevitably lead to poor performance

Effective Presentation

- Presentation document that adheres to standard documentation and presentation standards
- Oral presentation that employs each team member effectively, and involves the client interactively

Professional Conduct

- Error-free work: facts, figures, and spreadsheets must be error-free. The instructor and (in particular) the client must not become the quality control department. Consistent errors in work will lead to a loss of client confidence and a low grade in the course
- Professionalism: Teams must maintain a high level of professionalism in undertaking their work including: maintaining client confidentiality; quickly responding to client inquiries; showing up for meetings and conference calls on time; dressing appropriately for meetings; and fulfilling commitments (e.g., deadlines and deliverables)
- Self-motivation: Students should be eager to pursue their project work as a matter of self-interest in helping the client and learning about the nature of consulting work. Accordingly, students should be self-motivated to work at a steady pace pursuing deeper research and analysis. The need to continual prod teams to accomplish various tasks will negatively affect their grades

- Willingness to listen to instructor and/or client recommendations: A team's resistance to incorporating the instructor's suggestions and/or the wishes of clients will negatively affect their grades
- Independence: The ability of teams to work self-sufficiently is a positive attribute, depending on the circumstances. To the extent that the scope of work is within the team's capabilities, then independence is important. To the extent that the scope of work requires instructor input (as most do) then instructor/team brainstorming is important, with the team working rather independently week to week on the research task. The need for intensive instructor input on matters that should be within the team's capabilities will be negatively evaluated

Attendance, Participation and Milestones will Cap the Team/Individual Grade

Attendance and active participation at each of the meetings described above is required. Interaction with team members is an important aspect of a successful consulting experience and students will be expected to demonstrate collaborative teamwork in this course

Each team will be expected to meet a series of milestones including a charter, project plan, blank slide presentation, data analysis plan, draft presentation, and written weekly client updates. In addition, team members will conduct a peer review mid-course and at the end of the term. While none of these will be graded; less than 100% on-time compliance will reduce the team grade

Meaningful class participation is required. Failure to make substantive contributions during class and team meetings with the professor will put a limit on individual grades. For example, if the team earns an A, but an individual misses several classes or fails to participate actively in class, the individual grade could be limited to a B, even though the individual contributed significantly to an outstanding team project. This is a typical real-life fact of life in consulting

Caveat Emptor

This class differs in many ways from the conventional course. These differences will create a number of challenges for students. In particular, unlike the traditional class with its well-defined student-instructor role, students must deal with three interpersonal relationships. First, the professor's role is more of a project manager than a traditional lecturer, and depending on how well the project is progressing, I will have anywhere from moderate to heavy involvement in your project. Second, you must work effectively with your team members who may have different ideas and work styles. Third, you have the client organization with multiple people playing different roles in the project. Your success in this course will depend on your ability to cooperate, motivate, and otherwise work with a number of people as opposed to working independently as in a traditional course

In taking this class you will experience a number of real-world frustrations, including:

- Delays in getting data from clients
- Delays in setting up interviews
- Delays in approvals of interview guides and other materials
- Changing project scopes: bigger, narrower, or different
- Clients are unsure of what they are seeking from the project
- Your project does not seem important to your client
- Clients not responding to calls and emails and requests for project reviews
- Interviews are hard to do; people may not want to talk to you

- Client sponsors leave their organizations (especially in this economy)

I want to assure you that this is the reality of consulting. Clients are very busy and, in some cases, various individuals in the client organization might be in survival-mode to keep their jobs. This course will expose you to these real-world challenges and frustrations, and more importantly, teach you how to deal with them. For example, you will learn how persistence and diplomacy are needed to get others to cooperate with you, especially when they may not have an incentive to do so. You will also learn how to deal with frustrating impasses and seeming dead ends in research by finding alternative approaches for working around the impasse to achieve the project objectives

One final word of **warning**: consulting companies typically expect unreal hours of top performance by their associates. In a similar vein, this course will pressure you to put in more time than is typical of a graduate course. In addition to the meetings described below and the difficult analysis, students' work will be plagued by delays and false starts. I recommend that you budget no less than ten hours every week for this course. In other words, it is best to take this course during a term in which you do not have an otherwise **heavy workload**

Academic Honesty

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Instances of alleged dishonesty will be forwarded to the Office of Campus Life for possible referral to the Student Judicial System. Potential sanctions include failure in the course and suspension from the University. For the University policy on academic honesty, please see section 5 of *the Rights and Responsibilities Handbook*

Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately. Please keep in mind that reasonable accommodations are not provided retroactively

Calendar

The following is approximate, and be adapted as needed. Some projects are unique in that they require a slightly different timing. That is fine; this outline is provided as a general guideline. Active participation in class and team meeting times are crucial!

Week	Date	Due at 8AM on day of Class/Meeting*	Topic	Text	Format (may change)
1	9/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student agreement signed • Read project opportunity reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anatomy of consulting • Course overview • Project opportunity reviews • Brief (1 minute) presentations by each student about relevant background and skill, and preferred project • T E A M * F O C U S 	Ch 1-4	Full class
2	9/11	Project request (due Monday 8AM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team assignments • Project charter work session • Project work planning session 	Ch 5-7	Full class
3	9/18	Project charters and work plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client management • Refine charter, work plan, and data collection approaches 	Ch 8-9	Full class
4	9/25	Initial client meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team work assignments • Review secondary data findings • Finalize primary data collection and analysis plans and tools • Refine work plan 		Individual Teams
5	10/2	Data analysis plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structuring an effective presentation • Client review process 		Full class
6	10/9	No Class			
7	10/16	“Blank slide” presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and improve what the team thinks the final presentation will look like • Review status of data collection and analysis 		Individual Teams
8	10/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer review • Data analysis. This is no particular 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research progress 		Individual Teams

Week	Date	Due at 8AM on day of Class/Meeting*	Topic	Text	Format (may change)
		format. Data collection need not be finally completed. Whatever data is available should be analyzed straw-modeling the method that will be used in the final analysis			
9	10/30		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations 		Full class
10	11/6	Final data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings and Recommendations • Reframe presentation, develop a final presentation outline 		Individual Teams
11	11/13	Recommendations	Revise and improve final presentations		Full class
12	11/20	Presentation draft			Individual Teams
13	11/27	Presentation	Final Presentations (business attire)		Full class
14	12/4		Final Presentations (business attire)		Full class
15	12/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer review • Present to client during the prior week (business attire). Instructor must attend all presentations, so schedule in advance! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course review • Course evaluations 		Full class

*Also due each week after week 3, on LATTE: client update report and notes from client meeting, updated milestone chart, updated presentation (replacing blank slides with real slides, as they develop)