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**Enhancement of Team Work in MBA Programs:  
An Evaluation of Best Practices**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper suggests a set of best practices for the development and implementation of team work in MBA programs. The objective is to suggest ways in which to concurrently maximize positive student experiences and enhanced value to employers of MBA program graduates.

The research has two principal components. The first is a field study of team work involving the MBA program of the University of Maryland University College. This research involved a review of the program syllabi and field observations designed to identify key design aspects of team work projects as implemented at the University of Maryland University College.

The second component of the research is a focused literature review regarding academic team project difficulties and solutions. From the scholarly literature, several best practices are identified, including the following: the importance of early team member introductions and interactions; the need for a team work plan; the positive influence of faculty member expressions of high performance expectations and possible outcomes from the utilization of peer evaluations.

The literature review is utilized as the basis for a set of best practices related to the design and implementation of team work in MBA programs. The findings and recommendations offered relate to both process and structure issues and include the following: suggested roles for Faculty Assistants; required use of team work plans; adjustments to individual grades; use of peer evaluation forms; management of social loafing problems.

Key words: academic team work, MBA team work



## Introduction

The concept of team work has been around in both the business and academic world for many years, and businesses have long realized that teams are an effective way to get things done. However, as business becomes increasingly global, team work - and virtual teamwork in particular - have taken on greater importance (Olson-Buchanan, et al., 2007, p. 408). Business is placing growing importance on the ability of MBA graduates to lead and work effectively as part of teams. As clearly articulated by Wardell (1998, p. 4), "...a company's ability to seize an opportunity often depends on how fast it can field a team of talented individuals ... [placing] big premium on the skills of virtual management". However, a common criticism of business education, and MBA programs in particular, is that "MBA programmes ignore the importance of teamwork" (Neelankavil, 1994, p. 40). In a study which sets forth the "emerging model for management education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Kedia & Harveston, 1998, p. 208), contrast is drawn between the "traditional" MBA model and the "emerging" MBA model. In the former, education was individualistic and quantitative; while in the latter, education is increasingly analytical with emphasis on team work. In order to provide value to employers, MBA program graduates must be equipped with the skill set to operate effectively and efficiently in team situations. And in particular, in today's global business environment, MBA program graduates must be able to function productively in teams which are separated both temporally and geographically. It has become a core competency for MBA graduates to be comfortable "working with and managing those whom [they] do not see, except on rare and prearranged occasions (Handy, 1995, p. 42).

At the same time, however, MBA team projects need to be appealing and satisfying to students. This research project was inspired in part by the authors' observation, based upon student comments and classroom interactions, that student satisfaction was sometimes diminished by team dynamic difficulties. Some concerns in particular, applicable to both virtual and traditional (face-to-face)<sup>1</sup> team situations are: students often do not like team academic assignments; team assignments tend to boost the grades of weaker students while lowering the grades of stronger students; team projects are often hindered by the behavior of at least one "social loafer"<sup>2</sup>. In this regard,

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<sup>1</sup> It is noted here the MBA program at University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is offered in two configurations. The first format is entirely on-line and the second is offered partially on-line and partially face-to-face in a classroom. This second configuration has been designated as "hybrid".

<sup>2</sup> A "social loafer" is defined here as a team member who exhibits one or more of the following behaviors: a) fails to carry his/her apportioned share of the team's workload; b) doesn't communicate with the other team members or timely produce agreed-upon contributions; c) produces sub-standard work product which another team member must revise in-order for it to be useful to the team's final product; or d) causes friction or conflict within the team.



comments shared by one student are especially telling. That student<sup>3</sup> commented, "The weeks when team projects are due are generally easy weeks for me. The team divides up the work of the project, and the effort required is never as much as I would spend on an individual assignment. Team projects are not challenging. They should require one hundred percent of each member's effort. Team assignments should be more synergistic."

With these thoughts in mind, it is emphasized here that MBA programs need to deliver value to two key sets of stakeholders: MBA graduates and their employers. This paper seeks to identify a core set of best practices which will help ensure that MBA team projects deliver maximum value to these two key stakeholders.

## **Research Approach**

Based on the concerns expressed by students and MBA employers, as well as the authors' own observations and concerns, the authors felt an examination of MBA team project efficacy was timely. The authors' objective was to develop recommendations for mitigating the concerns of students and employers, thereby improving the overall efficacy of team work projects in MBA programs. In order to accomplish this, the authors sought to draw upon "best practices" in the area of team work. First, the authors collected information on how team work projects are currently developed and operating in UMUC's MBA program. Next, a literature review was conducted to identify possible solutions (best practices) for mitigating common issues which can hinder the efficacy of academic team projects.

## **Field Research- Findings and Observations**

The authors commenced their research by requesting information from the MBA program Course Managers. These information gathering efforts were designed to garner an understanding of how teams and team work are currently developed and operating within UMUC's MBA program. In addition, the authors conducted a focused analysis of the current MBA program syllabi, with emphasis on the team work related content.

### ***Overview of Findings***

This information gathering and analysis yielded several findings. First, it was apparent that the MBA program syllabi provide detailed instructions and expectations for the team project assignments. Teams are expected to develop a comprehensive team work plan for each project. Instructors and/or Faculty Assistants review the team work plans and provide feedback to the teams. Work plans are graded in only one course. Team organization and management is generally left to the discretion of each team. However, each syllabus stipulates that all team communication and individual contributions must be posted in the teams' Study Group Conferences. The end product of all team projects is a written paper. However, teams in most hybrid sections are also expected to make oral

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<sup>3</sup> The student who made this comment carried a 4.0 grade point average at the time of the interview.



presentations of their final projects. With few exceptions, team projects are not cumulative in nature. That is, they do not build upon preceding individual assignments or extend over the entire seminar. Provisions are made in each course syllabus for teams to submit peer evaluations after completing project. However, these evaluations are not required in every course, and there is wide variation in the forms and processes in use. Course Managers delegate to Instructors the authority to adjust individual students' grades up or down, but there is little process guidance on how to accomplish this. Faculty Assistants are generally charged with the "care-and-feeding" of teams, including the management of team process issues. However, it appears that Instructor-Faculty Assistant pairs in individual course sections may handle management of teams differently.

The authors' field research revealed that the MBA program syllabi provide detailed instructions and expectations for the team project assignments. Although it is intuitive that clear project instructions are important, "how-to" information for accomplishing this was not readily available in the literature. It is suggested here that particular care should be taken to provide instructions that are concise, complete and clear. In addition to specific details regarding due dates and where to submit completed projects, instructions should encourage students to seek clarification early on in the event of any perceived ambiguity.

### ***Performance Expectations***

As noted by Berlew and Hall (1966), when leaders have high expectations for a group, the group will generally "perform up" to meet or exceed those expectations. Berlew and Hall also noted (p. 208), "One of the strongest determinants of behavior is the expectations of other people. In the language of role theory...behavior...is strongly influenced by the expectations of significant others". It is therefore suggested that Instructors who consistently convey their high expectations for team work, and make these expectations known to their students, will find that their students complete and submit higher quality projects. The publication of project grading rubrics may offer a practical mechanism for establishing Instructor expectations.

### ***Initial introductions, coordination and work plans***

Numerous researchers cite the importance of maximizing team member interaction during the early phases of team projects. Napier and Johnson (2007, p. 44) Olson-Buchanan et al. (p. 414) and Wardell all recommend the exchange of "get acquainted" postings among team members. Wardell further concluded that teams which did this "had more overall communication during the project" (p.4). By utilizing socialization as a method for "establishing and reproducing trust relationships" (Nandhakumar, 1999, p. 47) this approach may help overcome the loss of trust which is known to sometimes plague virtual teams.



Bryant and Albring (2006) noted that "each team should appoint a coordinator who is responsible for keeping the team on track and focused during the project and for interacting with the Instructor" (p. 250). They also advocated (p. 250) that a "team contract should be required, and signed by team members." In making this recommendation, they commented (p. 243) "teams depend on synergy among team members to collectively produce a final product that is more than the simple sum of the individual parts". The team work plan thus becomes a tool for enabling "team members [to] hold themselves mutually accountable for the quality of the final product" (p. 243).

During the field research portion of this project, some Instructors reported that students "recycled" prior work plans, updating a previous work plan rather than creating a new one for use in the subsequent team project. One Instructor said, "Based on my experience with the same cohort groups in two separate courses, I found that team work plans do not change much from one course to another. In addition, it seems that students pay little attention to the team work plan once they have submitted it for review. In working with twenty sections of students where teams have done work plans, I have yet to encounter any team that has revised their work plan in 'mid-stream.'"

These comments mirror the authors' own observations, suggesting that students often do not appreciate the importance of the team work plan until after their project is completed. It is therefore suggested when team work plans are required, instructions should explicitly prohibit the reuse of previous work plans. Within the UMUC program, this parameter can be emphasized by the Faculty Assistants, whose role includes reviewing and offering feedback for work plans after they are submitted. The authors' research has revealed that team work plans are often not graded, perhaps contributing to a lack of appreciation for the importance of this "framework" document. In this regard, accountability may be enhanced with some nexus to the team project grade. For example, a five point deduction might be applied to the final project grade if no work plan is submitted.

## **Findings from the Literature and Field Research**

### **Team Organization and Management**

#### ***Team Selection and Composition***

Field research revealed that some MBA program Instructors permit teams to self-select, determining their membership independently. Other Instructors assign students to teams, and a variety of methods for accomplishing this was identified. These methods include: sequential grouping (alphabetic) based upon student last name; random groupings; assignments guided by student biographical information. One faculty member reports that he has assigned on-line teams by the geographic locations of the members. Overall, a single preferred method for assigning team members did not emerge from the field investigation.



Numerous authors have noted that team selection methodology is an important consideration when seeking to maximize student learning and satisfaction with team work. Napier and Johnson (p. 40) concluded specifically that "trust and commitment are increased and fewer conflicts are experienced when students work in groups with others that are like themselves". They further commented (p. 40) that this is supported by the tendency for students to "flock toward others that are like themselves when allowed to self-select their teams". Shaw (2004, as cited in Napier and Johnson, p. 41) "claim[ed] that student experiences in diverse teams are more difficult than those for homogenous teams". Hamlyn-Harris, Hurst, von Baggo and Bayley (2006, p. 304) also concluded that homogenous teams provide the optimal structure for maximizing student satisfaction, stating "homogenous teams are more satisfied with their team experience [and] "self-selecting teams will be more productive and satisfied than randomly formed teams". Of particular note, Drury, Kay and Losberg (2003, as cited by Hamlyn-Harris, p. 310) concluded that homogeneity is more important for students who have limited experience working in teams and are not as well-equipped to manage difficult team issues which arise.

It appears that in those MBA seminars where teams are not allowed to self-select, utilization of homogenous team groupings may enhance overall satisfaction with team projects. One approach would be to provide students with an assessment tool<sup>4</sup> and require them to self-select teams based upon the results. Where resources are limited, however, there may be barriers to the successful implementation of this approach. In this regard, Camara et al. (2007, p. 247) commented that "for some Instructors...it may be impractical or too expensive to administer a commercial test to determine technical expertise and innate ability...[but] GPA can be used as a tool to achieve the desired degree of homogeneity".

Finally, where homogenous team groupings are desired, team role theory may provide yet another model for determining complimentary personalities and preferences. According to Rushmer<sup>5</sup> (1996, as cited in Bryant and Albring, p. 247) the two preeminent models in this area are the Team Management System (TMS) model and the Belbin model. It is noted that the cost and time associated with implementation of these models may make their implementation prohibitive in some academic programs. However, as suggested by Bryant and Albring, it is fairly simple to determine a student's preference for working in teams. This information can then be utilized to ensure teams are not predominantly comprised of individuals who do not like team work (Rushmer, p. 247).

### ***Teams and Self-Management***

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<sup>4</sup> Such instruments include, for example, the "Team-work Knowledge, Skills and Ability (KSA)" test (which can be retrieved at <http://www.ramsaycorp.com/products/teamworkksa.asp> for \$13 a copy) and modified versions of the Myers-Briggs personality test.

<sup>5</sup> An in-depth exploration of these two models, and a discussion of their similarities, may be found in Rushmer, R.K. (1996). "Is Belbin's shaper really TMS's thruster-organizer? An empirical investigation into the correspondence between the Belbin and TMS team role models." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17(1), 20-30.



In light of the fact that MBA team projects ostensibly seek to provide experience with organizing, managing and participating in team work, it is not surprising that many MBA Instructors require teams to organize and manage themselves. Characteristic of the guidance provided to students in this regard is the following statement from the AMBA 650 syllabus:

"Although individual Team members may take on certain management and editing tasks in the Team Work Plan, all Team members are collectively responsible for understanding and preparing all Team assignment material."

Requiring teams to produce a work plan can serve as a meaningful way for Instructors to assist teams with their initial organization efforts, and ensure they go through the critical preliminary steps of establishing a framework. Further, the team work plan can serve as a "foundational tool" for ensuring a commonality of understanding, helpful in assisting teams to work through difficult issues.

### *Team Communications*

Each course syllabus stipulates that all team communication and individual contributions must be posted in the teams' study group conferences so that Instructors and FAs can monitor team progress. In addition, individual contributions to the team effort can be tracked from these postings.

Teams seem to have near-limitless technological communications methods for conducting their team business. These include both synchronous and asynchronous tools such as teleconferencing, email, Voice over Packet (VoP), and other web-based chat facilities such as Skype. In addition, in hybrid sections of the MBA program, teams may elect to meet in person. While teams may initially schedule these meetings during their planning and organizing phase, it is rarely possible to proceed with their project without substantial usage of electronic communications.

As with any organization involving people with a range of personal and professional agendas, teams often discover all members cannot participate in every team communication activity. By publishing minutes of their meetings, teams can assist absent members in "catching-up".

### *Individual Contributions*

Ideally, it would seem that a team project should be the culmination of one or more individual assignments, brought together and synthesized by the team, and enhanced through the incorporation of additional transitional material, an executive summary, conclusion, and reference list. However, this only appears to take place in two of the AMBA courses<sup>6</sup>. Student teams in the executive MBA program, however, utilize

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<sup>6</sup> The courses are AMBA 603 and AMBA 607.



prior individual assignments to complete their team projects. While this approach may not be uniformly feasible within the constructs of the learning objectives and assignments of each course, the authors suggest this as a worthy target.

#### *Social Loafing*

Social Loafing, as defined by Rothwell (1979, p. 83) is the "...tendency of individual group members to reduce their work effort...as displayed by the inclination to 'goof off' when performance is needed in a group, miss meetings, show up late, or fail to start or complete individual tasks." Social loafing in the MBA program is a modest problem, particularly felt by better students, who sometimes complain to the FA or the Instructor. Social loafing can be disruptive in the long-term if early action is not taken. Given the wide range of student abilities at UMUC, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between social loafing and insufficient competence to contribute fully to a team assignment. This is a particular challenge where projects involve quantitative skills or computer software usage.

The Course Managers seem to agree that social loafing problems should be managed initially by the members of the team. As noted in the literature, the syllabus instructions may be utilized to provide directives on how to handle a non-participating team member. Specifically, (Olson-Buchanan et al., p. 415) the syllabus can require team members to first attempt to contact the "missing" team member, with the goal of motivating him to participate. Thereafter, team members can be instructed to "proceed without the team member if [those] these efforts are unsuccessful" (p. 415). Another approach would allow teams to "fire" an uncooperative or unproductive team member. Camara, Carr and Grota (p. 8) cited the benefits of this approach, stating that "at the time of team formation, students were informed that each team had the option of 'firing' a team member for lack of effort, poor attitude, and/or failure to contribute meaningfully to the team work product." Brandyberry and Bakke (2006) added that "[This] option was instituted as a means of putting 'free riders' or 'social loafers' on notice" (p. 198). For a team to "abandon" or "fire" one member seems a bit extreme and counterproductive when the objective is to foster team work skills. Therefore, this does not appear as a viable solution to social loafing in the MBA program.

In their study involving IS students, Brandyberry and Bakke implemented an online activity log and peer evaluation system in an effort to minimize social loafing. The online platform required dated entries by each team member consisting to specify the type of activity completed, along with a description and an indication of the amount of time spent on the activity. The conclusion of this study (p. 203) was that, "after several semesters of utilizing the system it was the consensus of the Instructors that the system was quite successful in meeting the goals of mitigating negative group behaviors and assessing individual contributions".

It is acknowledged that an evaluation of such electronic systems is beyond the scope of the present study. However, further examination in future may be beneficial. Meanwhile, a less complex alternative could be to require each team to complete these logging activities through the use of an Excel workbook with a separate worksheet for



each team member. This would accomplish the goal of providing further transparency regarding individual contributions, providing teams with an additional tool for managing their productivity, without the additional burden of requiring faculty to read each and every posting.

### *Peer Evaluations*

In seeking to identify best practices, the authors found that there is no fail-proof means for ensuring equitable participation and contribution by all team members. However, there is strong support for the use of peer evaluation forms as an effective means for attaining individual accountability and minimizing social loafing.

As noted by Brandyberry and Bakke (p. 196), "team members are more likely to engage in social loafing when their individual outputs cannot be evaluated from the final team project". Numerous researchers have concluded that the peer evaluation form should be viewed as an essential accountability tool. (Brandyberry & Bakke; Bacon, Stewart and Silver (1999)).

In addition, peer evaluation forms have been identified as a tool for enabling students to improve self-awareness and, in turn, their team work skills. Brandyberry and Bakke (p. 197) supported this perspective and commented that, "...because of the importance of being an effective and contributing team member, students should be evaluated on their ability to interact, work and collaborate with others."

Although using peer evaluations in the MBA program is an option left to the individual Instructors, each syllabus in the programs indicates that they may be required. In general, it appears that Instructors use peer evaluations when there is some evidence of conflict and difficulties among the team members.

Gueldenzoph and May (2002, p. 11) stated that one best practice includes "ensuring students understand before the project begins the who, what, when, why and how of the assessment process." Their study involved a comprehensive review of several peer evaluation studies and identified (p. 12) the following criteria as typically utilized and meaningful: commitment to the group (attendance at meetings); ability to deal constructively with conflicts that arise (team communications); active participation in decision-making process (devotes time to the project); accountability for assigned tasks (doing what was asked and producing quality work); and assumption of initiative or leadership role (actual participation and interest in the process).

Crews and North (2000, as cited in Brandyberry & Bakke) suggested using a multi-faceted approach to team member evaluation, combining the Instructor's assessment of the final team product with a self-evaluation and peer evaluation by each team member. They further noted, "students are more motivated to deliver quality peer evaluations if they perceive the evaluations have some value" (p. 198). In that regard, consequences for inadequate participation may include allowing the Instructor to adjust individual grades up or down based upon the evaluation.

### *Adjusting Individual Team Member's Marks*



Based upon field observations and literature review, it is less obvious how Instructors use the information contained in the peer evaluations. The MBA program syllabi all indicate that Instructors may adjust individual team member's marks based upon the Instructor's assessment of an individual's contributions. In practice, faculty may ask students to complete peer evaluation forms when discord and team issues are reported. Then, if negative evaluations are provided via the peer evaluation forms, faculty can take the next step of more closely examining an individual student's contributions. Individual grades may be adjusted based upon the results of the Instructor's detailed review of a student's contributions. With this approach, the peer evaluation is not in itself used as a basis for determining a student's grade.

Overall, however, there seems to be little specific guidance to Instructors regarding when and how to adjust a student's marks. A review of the literature finds general agreement that use of peer evaluations for grade adjustment purposes is appropriate. In fact, according to Brandyberry & Bakke (p. 198), "determin[ation of] peer's grades" is cited as an "attractive outcome of peer evaluations." Grade adjustment through the use of peer evaluations is also supported by Olson-Buchanan et al. (p. 413) and Camara et al. (p. 6). However, Camara et al. indicate that the literature supports the practice of limiting the weight of peer evaluations.

### ***Review and Analysis of Current Peer Evaluation Forms and Processes In-Place***

The authors reviewed several different peer evaluation forms and processes currently utilized in the MBA program. One that appeared to be the most uncomplicated and workable requires each student to provide feedback at the end of the semester on the contributions of their team colleagues<sup>7</sup>. This evaluation is accomplished by distributing one hundred points among all team members, including a brief commentary to support the evaluation and point allocation. The evaluation is to be based upon the following factors:

- Preparation: Were the team mates well prepared for the team work assignments?
- Contribution: Did the team member contribute productively and equitably to team decisions and work?
- Respect for other's ideas: Did team mates encourage others to contribute ideas?
- Flexibility: Were team mates flexible when disagreements occurred?

The authors identified a somewhat similar methodology in the literature in connection with a study conducted by Napier and Johnson. There, a novel approach to qualitative peer evaluation was utilized, asking students to evaluate their team mates by apportioning "a hypothetic bonus of \$10,000 dollars...amongst the...team members" (p. 42). Students were instructed that, "If they divided the amount unequally, [they] had to provide a rationale for doing so" (p. 42). According to the researchers, the benefit to this approach was that they "were able to detect teams that had conflict as well as the source of this conflict" (p. 42).

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<sup>7</sup> This peer evaluation process is utilized in AMBA 620.



While this type of approach appears both practical and useful, it still does not provide guidance to the Instructor on how to consolidate and use the information provided by the students.

### *Faculty Assistants and Teams*

Across the MBA program, it appears that Instructor-Faculty Assistant pairs handle the management of teams in their sections differently.<sup>8</sup> However, all Faculty Assistants are all graduates of the MBA program and were excellent students while in the program. This experience enables them to add value to the teams and to the Instructors. Analysis of the syllabi showed that the Faculty Assistants have a major role in the "care and feeding" of teams in MBA courses. Some of the duties assigned to the Faculty Assistants are: assigning students to teams; providing counsel and consulting on team projects, including process and team dynamics issues; reviewing work plans and providing feedback to the teams; mediating team conflict problems prior to involving faculty; addressing questions related to class process and other "wayfinding" issues.

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<sup>8</sup> It appears that Instructors need to work with the same Faculty Assistant for two or more terms before a "comfort level" exists whereby the Instructor is willing to fully utilize the Faculty Assistant's skills and abilities. In some courses, the assignment of Instructor-Faculty Assistant pairs changes with some rapidity, thereby, slowing down the development of this comfort level.



## Recommendations

### *Team Project Design*

Based upon their observations, field research and literature review, the authors believe that team assignments attain greater rigor and success when certain criteria are met. With this in mind, the authors offer the recommendations which follow.

### *Scaffolded Team Projects*

Whenever possible, course syllabi should be constructed to include individual, sequential assignments which provide a series of scaffolded activities. These activities should promote cumulative learning from week to week, building on what has been learned previously. In a likewise manner, team assignments should culminate in integrated and logically constructed final deliverables which, whenever possible, depend upon the preceding individual assignments. While the prior individual assignments will be graded, they should not merely be combined to produce the team's submission. Rather, they should be reworked, through enhancements and editing, ensuring that the final team product has appropriate transitions and appear to be written in "one-voice." Whenever possible, team assignments should be constructed so that they continue throughout the entire semester, culminating with a final deliverable at the end of the course. As a goal, and when possible, these final end products should be something other than merely an academic paper. Instructors should be encouraged to use technology and available media for teams to present their projects to their peers.



### *Transparency of Individual Contributions*

It should be required that individual contributions of all team members be posted in one location. This is currently accomplished in the UMUC MBA program via use of a Team Study Group conference within the WebTycho classroom. Students should be advised of this requirement and cautioned that if they fail to post their individual contributions, they may not get credit for the assignment. It should be added that merely posting a narrative summary of their individual contribution is insufficient. Teams should also be required to post all group meeting minutes, regardless of the meeting format.

### *Adjustment of Individual Grades*

Each student on a team will typically receive the same grade for an assignment. However, a team member's grade may be adjusted downward for a specific assignment if the faculty member determines the quality of that person's participation to be substandard. As described above, peer evaluation forms may be utilized to ascertain when closer scrutiny of an individual student's contributions is merited.

### *Communication of Expectations*

Instructors should communicate with each team shortly after the teams are formed to answer questions and reinforce high expectations for each team's performance. A teleconference or chat session might very well serve the purpose for virtual class formats.

### **Team Work Plans**

The authors recommend requiring teams to prepare team work plans, as is the practice in UMUC's MBA program. In order to ensure that the team work plan is meaningful, a template agreement should be provided to students including the following minimum content items: mission and vision statements; listing of relevant individual team member skills and experiences (strengths and weaknesses); identification of roles and duties for each team member, including assigned deliverables; identification of a team coordinator; a work plan schedule for intermediary and final deliverables; plans for managing team communications, including conflict resolution and contingency planning.

It is further recommended that students be assigned to teams at the start of the term. Teams should be encouraged to make contact immediately, to begin planning and organizing. The team work plan should be due early in the term, at least three weeks before the first team project is due. Particularly in later courses during the MBA program, teams should be permitted to develop their work plans without a standardized template. However, when this approach is utilized, Instructors should still require that certain mandatory content (described above) be included. Team work plans must be posted in the team's Study Group. However, faculty may wish to consider having teams



develop their own team website.<sup>9</sup> The team web site could be utilized to post the team work plan, team communications, and completed assignments. Use of team web sites can be valuable in MBA programs which emphasize technology competence.

The Faculty Assistant in each course should review each team work plan and provide feedback to each team, with suggestions for improvement. This feedback should be provided as quickly as possible after the team work plans are submitted, so as to allow teams to make any recommended changes. In instances where the team work plans are not graded, Instructors should use the final project grading to comment on the impact of the work plan vis-à-vis the final project.

### **Team Organization and Management**

Faculty should consider conducting an introductory conference to explain the team component of the course. Thereafter, faculty should consider hosting team conferences at subsequent key junctures in the course, so as to facilitate productive team work relationships. Faculty should also visit the team conference rooms several times during the week, and be available for team discussions if these are requested.

It is suggested here that the day-to-day management of the team interactions should be left to the team members. This approach is recommended because it requires team members to draw upon, and develop, their own team management competencies. However, there are occasions when Instructor intervention may be warranted and even necessary. Here, it is suggested here that faculty should intervene in team dynamics problems only when asked to do so. In these instances, Instructors may be required to assume the role of a consultant or mediator where team problems are affecting the team's ability to function, and the team had exhausted its own resources for resolving the problem(s).

### **Social Loafing**

The authors recommend that MBA programs need to adopt a uniform stance for dealing with social loafing problems. This is necessary to ensure a mechanism for keeping social loafing from having a significant negative impact on individual and team learning.

Overall, students should be encouraged to take responsibility for managing team performance, and resolving matters within their team before escalating them. However, when social loafing problems are escalated to faculty, the Faculty Assistant should first direct all team members back to its team work plan as a guide for continuous improvement and/or course correction. This presumes, of course, that their work plan adequately provides for conflict resolutions and contingencies. When this step is insufficient, the Faculty Assistant should explore further the allegations of social loafing.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Jay Alden, a colleague of the authors, introduced and tested using Wikis in place of the Study Group Conference for the students to collaboratively manage and develop their team project. He reported success with this test, saying using Wikis made it "...easy for him to identify the extent of contribution by each team member...." (*Wiki Survey*, Fall, 2008). Wikis appear to be potential viable alternative.



In particular, the Faculty Assistant should review individual contributions posted in the team study group conference. It is suggested that Faculty Assistants advise the class Instructors of any instances where this type of escalated review is initiated. As a method for moving the team past its impasse, the Faculty Assistant can also ask that team members complete a peer evaluation form and submit it to the team conference area, for further review and discussion. Where one or more students appear to be engaged in social loafing, the Faculty Assistant can discuss this situation with the individual student(s). Thereafter, if social loafing persists, the Faculty Assistant and Instructor should consult and discuss in detail the preceding circumstances. At this point intervention by the Instructor may be necessary, with eventual intervention by the course manager if the situation is especially difficult. The option of permitting a team to “fire” a member, or allowing an individual to “opt out” of a team project should be utilized only in the very most extreme situations, when all other interventions have been unsuccessful.

### **Peer Evaluations and Grade Adjustments**

It is suggested here that faculty should consider adjusting an individual team member’s grade, in situations where that individual has not made an equitable contribution to the final team project. This practice is supported by the literature on academic team projects, as described above. However, it is cautioned that where a grade adjustment is made, that the faculty member base this upon demonstrable evidence of sub-standard contributions.

As described earlier, the peer evaluation process utilized in AMBA 620 appears to offer an uncomplicated and workable approach<sup>10</sup>. The results of the peer evaluation process should be utilized to identify where a closer examination of an individual’s contributions and participation is warranted. In instances where the faculty member finds evidence of lagging participation and sub-standard contributions by an individual, a grade adjustment could then be made based upon the empirical findings.

On a cautionary note, it is strongly recommended that peer evaluations not be the sole basis for making a grade adjustment. The concern is that this practice might lead to allegations of arbitrary grading practices. Rather, peer evaluations should be utilized only as a basis for identifying when there may be need to conduct a closer examination of an individual’s contributions. In situations where an Instructor feels a grade adjustment is merited, it is suggested here that the adjustment should only in rare instances exceed -5 points from the team's grade for the project.

### **Faculty Assistants and Teams**

It is recommended here that faculty assistance should be the first resource for guidance and coaching on team projects, including assistance with team dynamics problems. Best practices for Faculty Assistants should include the following: regularly monitoring

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<sup>10</sup> This approach involves each student evaluating the contributions of his/her team members (including themselves) and allocating 100 points among the team members. A brief commentary is provided, in support of the evaluation.



progress in the team Study Group conference; availability for team discussions when requested; working with the teams on process questions and issues, prior to faculty involvement; helping students with “wayfinding” questions related to issues such as computer/classroom software and library research; reviewing and commenting on the team work plans.

## **Conclusion**

The ever-increasing globalization of business has led employers to place greater value on MBA graduates who possess strong teamwork skills, including the ability to lead and participate effectively in diverse, virtual teams. In conclusion, the authors suggest that MBA programs can add value in two key ways. First, MBA programs must ensure that their graduates have the team work skills which employers are seeking. This can be accomplished by designing MBA programs which move away from the traditional individualistic learning models and instead place greater emphasis on analytical skills and team work. Second, MBA programs must ensure that MBA student satisfaction is maximized. Both of these objectives can be facilitated through adoption of the specific recommendations presented in this paper.

Areas for further research, in future, might include exploration of the relation between MBA team project features and student satisfaction. In addition, future research might be conducted to identify the skills most sought by employers of MBA program graduates and how these might be enhanced through specific features of team projects.



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**Enhancement of Team Work in MBA Programs: An Evaluation of Best Practices**

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