

Who's in Charge? Designing Experiential Project Courses to Expose Students to the Multi-Stakeholder World of Work Today

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Experiential field-based learning (FBL) courses have an increasing presence in business school programs. Tools are needed to help with the effective design, analysis and curriculum development of this multi-stakeholder project-based pedagogy. The FBL Social Network Model can be used for this type of analysis and can be applied in various ways. This article reviews this framework, how to deploy it and its relevance around effectively designing FBL courses to prepare students for the multi-dimensional demands of the digital world of work today.

Keywords: MBA, experiential learning, field-based learning

INTRODUCTION

For students in business schools today, where often so much of their course materials and in many cases course experience is online, hands-on experiential team projects allow students to apply and test out with others what they have been learning in their course work. These include such skills as applying digital analytical tools to a specific problem, project management, effectively processing and synthesizing information and having productive team discussions. Experiential projects give students the opportunity to practice what they are learning in a more controlled, safe environment in preparation for their future careers. Doing so, addresses employers concerns that programs are not adequately preparing students for the actual practice of managerial work and its often ambiguous, complex challenges (Mintzberg, 2004; Raelin, 2009; Somers, Passerini, Parhankangas, & Casal, 2014). And this need for better prepared business school graduates is only augmented by the increasing pervasiveness of AI and digital tools in the business environment (Dwivedi et al, 2019; Klotz, 2019). Consequently, in recent years as Willness and Bruni-Bossio (2010) state “there has been a growing emphasis on experiential learning approaches as one potential remedy... Experiential learning can enhance learning outcomes for students and provide them with opportunities to practice what they learn in the classroom” (p. 135).

One form of experiential pedagogy is Field-Based Learning (FBL) with a real company or organization. Baker and Schomberg (2003) define a field study as “a for-credit course or project where a small team of MBA students conducts a consulting-type study, for a business or other organization” (p. 35). The outcome of this type of experiential learning, which in business school programs also goes by other names such as “project-based learning” and “action-based learning,” requires the production of a final report or a presentation to the sponsoring organization (DeFillippi & Milter, 2009; Savery, 2006; Ungaretti, Thompson, Miller & Peterson, 2015).

A considerable amount of ambiguity and uncertainty surround field-based project courses where students rely on support roles that include teaching assistants, practitioners, alumni, and librarians who help them understand unfamiliar areas of the business (Lenton et. al., 2014). The array of stakeholders involved is a key distinction of this instruction. Instead of leading the instruction, the professor, with the help of others, works in a coaching role to facilitate learning (Datar, Garvin & Cullen, 2010). FBL requires “more individual coaching and assessment, and thus ... requirements for quantitative and qualitative increases in teaching effort and infrastructural support” (Skipton & Cooper, 2012, p. 36). Programs consequently can face many challenges in their delivery of FBL courses. These include the artificial constructs of a course timeframe, the limitations of working within an academic format and the potential inadequacy of types and number of staff needed to provide the necessary customized attention to student teams. Other factors include contending with the variability of projects reflective of the changeability of business, the challenges faced by staff and faculty in adapting to new roles to support FBL instruction and adequately communicating learning outcomes to all stakeholders beyond those directly involved in this instruction (Cullen, 2017, p. 148).

It truly is incredible given how prominent this form of instruction is in business schools that there has been very little investigation into the development of instructional and curricular design models for it. Despite its current common deployment in business school curriculum, research on ways to take a step back and compare how these courses are structured at different schools and the options available to analyze program offerings and improve upon them is not common (McKeen, Laufer & Jester, 2018; Willness & Bruni-Bossio, 2017). For many faculty members the “sage on the stage” concept of instruction is deeply engrained, and instructors can find designing and teaching these courses difficult. Fully appreciating all the stakeholders involved in this instruction can be a challenge, so it is necessary to create tools to help them see the different dynamics of this instruction and fully understand all the parties involved.

In the domain of “service learning” which is often used to describe these sorts of project courses in other disciplines, some models and frameworks do exist in the teaching and learning literature (Lowery, 2006; Zhang, 2011). But in the area of business school curriculum despite the increase of FBL courses (Rynes & Bartunek, 2013), there has been very little focus on models for business educators to use to help them to assess and analyze their design and structure. Looking more closely at course structures could benefit student learning outcomes. Institutional benefits could also be gained through closer examination of the structure of this instruction and all the stakeholders involved. For example, this could offer a different way to connect with alumni and to identify alumni that could assist with supporting this curriculum that otherwise would have remained unknown. Through examining these structures, individuals and entities could be identified inside as well as outside a business school program and its institution that feel a strong affiliation with it that otherwise might not have been uncovered.

There is ample evidence that educational objectives can be enhanced by taking a broader and deliberative approach to the instructional design of courses (Lau, 2001; Whetten, 2007). By doing so, course designers are considering all factors and stakeholders to address the needs of students, faculty and staff as well as particularly in the case of experiential project-based learning, the surrounding community. The *FBL Social Network Model* presented in the next section is an example of a tool for this form of analysis that can be used for curriculum design work.

REVIEW OF THE MODEL

The *FBL Social Network Model* was developed as part of research examining the organizational infrastructure of experiential field-based learning courses in six of the top 20 U.S. two-year MBA programs based on the *US News & World Report* ranking (Cullen, 2017). Each school had their own model for the organizational design and grouping of roles providing customized support to guide these team projects. Schools varied in the structure of their courses, the definition of roles, and levels of role support engagement. To give an example of what these networks look like, Appendix A presents both the model template and the actual models of the six case study institutions examined. Roles that student teams were required to meet with are represented with the number “1”. The two further numbered levels of engagement

represent subsequent less connected direct support for student teams. To the point of a proximal node of “Advocacy” (A) which denotes roles that advocated for the FBL curriculum but had no direct connection to actual instruction or coaching support for student teams but was still an important component of pedagogical support. By adding a node in a network for roles not directly proximally connected presents a way to think about stakeholders that are essential to a program’s delivery of FBL but who are not actually coaching or teaching. For example some Career Service Professionals interviewed were identified in their school network diagrams as “Advocates” because even though they were not involved in this instruction they stated how helpful these courses could be in their work positioning students to get jobs (see p. 136-142, Cullen, 2017 for further details). Appendix B lists the roles identified in the six case studies analyzed.

The *FBL Social Network Model* with its use of qualitative case study data differs from standard social network methodology. Typically, the social network analysis method looks at data sets using mathematical models to study multi-relational networks. According to Carolan (2014), there are four distinguishing features that define the typical research methodology of a social network analysis:

First, this work had strong structural intuitions – a focus on the embedded patterns of relations within and between groups. Second, it emphasized the systematic collection and analysis of empirical data. Third, this work included graphical imagery as part of its tools; and fourth, there was the use of explicit mathematical models, which helped induce the highest degree of objectivity possible. (p. 26)

So clearly from the perspective of employing quantitative analysis, the proposed *FBL Social Network Model* diverges from current research practice. However, a case can be made that the positional analysis that the use of a social network model affords is relevant when applied to qualitative data as well.

Traditional social network analysis because of its use of empirical modeling claims towards greater objectivity in understanding the relationships between people in a social network. But an issue to be confronted is how much the analysis of these ties is also appreciating context. A more qualitative use of this method can include contextuality through graphically mapping out relationships as in the case of the social network model of stakeholders to the student teams. FBL courses are impacted not only by the internal institutional resources available for support but also the external contextual features such as where the institution is located and the type of alumni networks that can be tapped into. For example, MBA programs located in urban locations will likely have more nearby project partners at their disposal than rural locations. So, having a tool to map out those types of factors offers a more objective way to approach curriculum design and analysis. A point could be made that the deliberative exercise of collecting the data about the stakeholders and relationships in the courses using the chart presented in Appendix B can make the process of analysis and design of these courses more empirical and objective. Then once this data is collected, presenting it in the form of a Social Network Model (see Appendix A) offers course designers a way to graphically see all the roles involved to help in understanding what adjustments might need to be made.

The model proposed offers an objective mechanism to inform discussions about FBL curriculum design to see everything that is going on and all the stakeholders involved. These stakeholders are “anyone who affects or is affected by a particular course or program. This may include students, faculty colleagues, department heads, and deans (all of whom can be considered internal stakeholders), as well as community-based organizations, funding agents, government, and businesses (external stakeholders)” (Willness & Bruni-Bossio, p. 150, 2017).

Business Schools need to deploy FBL instruction well. They need to effectively identify all related stakeholders for many reasons such as adding current ideas to the classroom, getting high quality real life expertise injected just in time into courses, engaging the community in instruction, locating new sources of funding, bringing diverse perspectives to the classroom and creating opportunities for peer learning. Using this tool, the structure of these courses can be analyzed to consider the many roles enriching this form of student learning that makes it so distinct. The *FBL Social Network Model* provides a window into graphically seeing what is being done.

In applying this model other frameworks might be paired with it to inform its analysis. The *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* is one example. Created by Chelsea Willness and Vince Bruni-Bossio it is another tool available to assist with the design of experiential learning courses. It is structured as follows:

The two sides of the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas*, delineated by the thick arrows, represent different phases of the curriculum development process. First on the left, are the foundation elements, such as identifying stakeholders, building relationships, and developing inclusive communication processes. On the right are the action elements that involve moving the idea toward implementation, such as identifying resources and defining desired outcomes... [and] in the center are the value propositions... to which all other elements connect (p. 148).

The *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* in one visual framework (see Willness & Bruni-Bossio, p. 146) lays out all the key stakeholders connected with these courses and the inter-relationships between them. The focus in the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* is the “Value Proposition” surrounded by related details informing all aspects of experiential course creation. Its structure “prompts breaking things into smaller tasks so that they can be combined, examined, and molded into an infinite variety of patterns and possibilities” (p. 148). Linking this framework together with the *FBL Social Network Model* could offer a useful method for curriculum design and analysis of these courses. It is an example of how an already established framework could inform and enhance the *FBL Social Network Model*.

SCENARIO FOR APPLYING THE FBL SOCIAL NETWORK MODEL

This section will now describe a scenario of how an organization might apply the *FBL Social Network Model* paired with another relevant framework, in this case the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas*. The designers will first consider the various blocks of the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* and answer the questions posed by each block as completely as possible. Once all the blocks in the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* have been filled in, attention then would focus on the blocks for “Stakeholder Groups” and “Stakeholder Relationships” to inform the content of the *FBL Social Network Model*.

To analyze a course, one would first take the roles listed in the “Stakeholders Group” block and then using the attributes listed in the “Stakeholders Relationships” block, identify the proximal levels of stakeholder nodes. This data would then be plotted out in the *FBL Social Network Model* with the project team at the center. Once all the stakeholders are placed in the FBL network model it might be realized that certain individuals and relationships were missed in the originally devised *Canvas*. Thus, the *FBL Social Network Model* could also serve as a check when using the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* for curriculum designers to make sure all stakeholders are included.

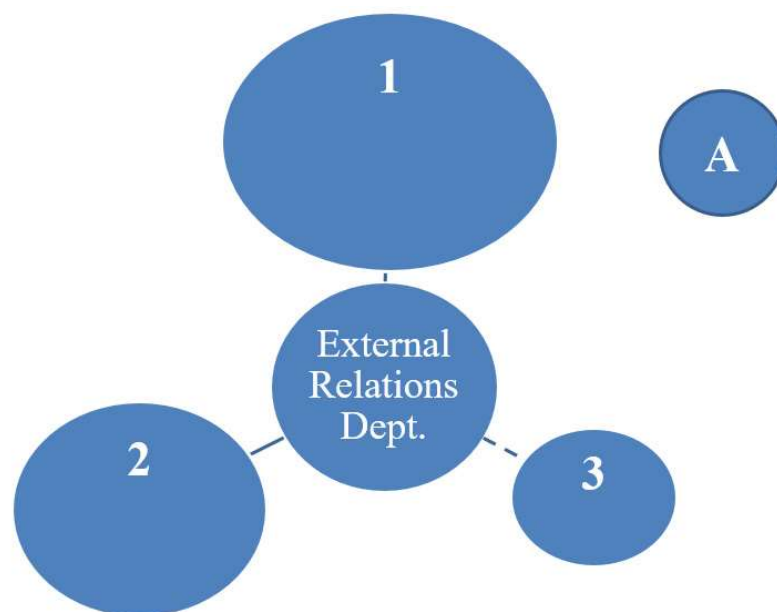
ADDITIONAL SCENARIOS

In using the *FBL Social Network Model*, the student team is central because the key element of the value proposition of these courses is student team learning. Since the student team is at the center of the model, the positional analysis is only between the stakeholders at whatever level they may be supporting the student team. No analysis in this version of the model is assessing the strength of ties between the stakeholders themselves and their network beyond the FBL course. By adapting the *FBL Social Network Model*, possibly a second stage of analysis could include looking at the network of ties of dependent stakeholders in other contexts.

Visualizing the networks of stakeholders to FBL courses could inform ways to better integrate FBL curricular support. For example, it could be determined that the External Relations department is a clear FBL advocate, but their connection with FBL at times has been frustrated because they have also approached alumni in other institutional initiatives that are counter-productive to FBL course learning objectives. Looking closely at the stakeholder relationships of this department using the *FBL Social*

Network Model in a different configuration with the External Relations department at the center offers a mechanism for a deeper analysis (see Figure 1). Doing this allows course designers to examine the value proposition of this department to the institution in comparison to its role regarding FBL instruction. By closely looking at the networks from these two vantage points, relationships might be rethought to improve outcomes, streamline processes and correct any misalignment of activities.

FIGURE 1
MODEL TO EXAMINE AN EXTERNAL RELATIONS DEPARTMENT'S SOCIAL NETWORK



The *FBL Social Network Model* could also be used for a curriculum team design exercise. First identifying all the stakeholders using a chart like the one in Figure 2 to plot out individually what each member of the design team saw the levels to be. (This follows the same form of analysis presented in Appendix B.) Then, together as a group as a form of collective member checking, the design team could review the list of each person and debate where everyone saw various stakeholders. Through this discussion the group could then arrive at a consensus on how to plot out these levels in the *FBL Social Network Model* for the course they are developing. This would create a visual diagram for them to work from.

These metrics might also be applied to a computer tool where each member of the design group could first go through the exercise of filling out the levels and then use that information to inform a graphical computer model of what the proximal levels are. By plugging this information into a computer program to calculate proximity values, stakeholder levels everyone agreed on would be quickly revealed to determine which still needed to be debated in person amongst the group.

FIGURE 2
CHART TO PLOT OUT LIST OF ROLES AND THEIR PROXIMITY TO FBL STUDENT TEAMS

Type of Role	Role Description	Level of Formality	Staff/ Faculty/ External?

As Willness and Bruni-Bossio state, with the *Curriculum Innovation Canvas* “core elements of curriculum, such as content and evaluation, remain essential components but are framed somewhat differently in the context of substantiating the value propositions and co-creation with stakeholders” (p. 157). The same can be said of the *FBL Social Network Model* which offers yet another way to view the structure of these courses. This framework can be used in the design or evaluation of a single course, but elements of it could also prove useful in a multi-institutional analysis of these sorts of courses (Cullen, 2017). In either case, offering rich information for institutions to work with if they wish to study options or refine how they are offering this type of learning and to identify gaps that need to be addressed.

CONCLUSION

There is wide agreement on the advantages of FBL in MBA curriculum (Brown et al., 2013; Datar et al., 2010) but no comparative descriptions and analysis have been produced of the deployment and structural design of these courses. The *FBL Social Network Model* highlights the centrality of the student team rather than the typical hierarchical organization chart to examine this form of learning. It offers a way to think about closeness of support as a pedagogical lever for the design of these courses. It stresses the student team as the center of this form of learning surrounded by various levels of instructional support as opposed to the traditional “sage on the stage” instructor-student dynamic. There are few existing diagnostic tools available relevant to this form of business curriculum design and analysis.

The model proposed can be used to further understanding of the structure of this multi-stakeholder form of learning. This pedagogy uniquely prepares students for the multi-faceted and ambiguous aspects of the business environment that typical classroom and online teaching do not. The many stakeholders involved in project work today requires being more skilled in this area making students a step above the rest in today’s competitive, highly dynamic work environment; made even more fluid with the influence of the increased digitization of business. Without the tools to appreciate and call out the stakeholders and the

distinct types of relationships between them there is the possibility that those designing these courses could overlook the full contributions of all these roles.

Using the *FBL Social Network Model* offers a means for further examination and exploration of FBL course structures and ways to help designers refine them. Its use could also help address the all too common challenge of uneven student team learning outcomes in these courses. Better structures and tools are needed to understand all the dynamics of what is going on in this type of learning that is so different from the typical classroom and the *FBL Social Network Model* offers a new way to examine the design of these courses. By taking a deep analysis of how a program has chosen or will choose to structure this type of course through completely understanding all the stakeholders involved can reveal exciting new avenues of awareness about how these courses operate and can be enhanced.

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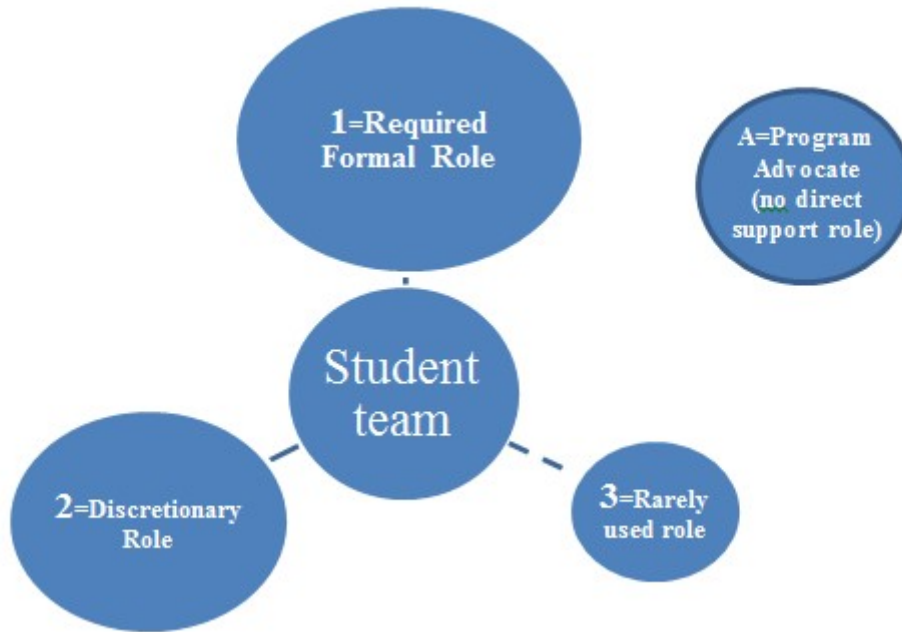
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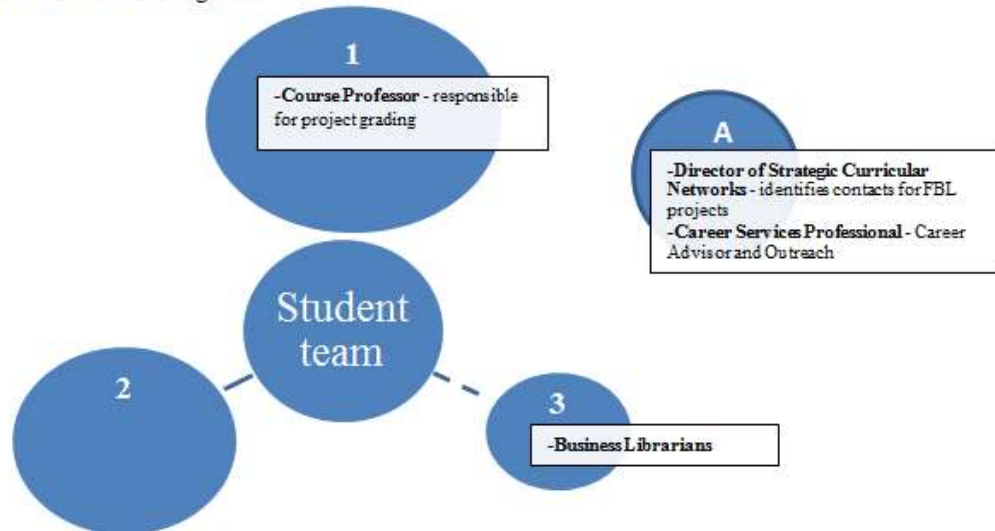
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**APPENDIX A
FBL SOCIAL NETWORK MODEL FOR LEVEL OF STUDENT TEAM ROLE SUPPORT**

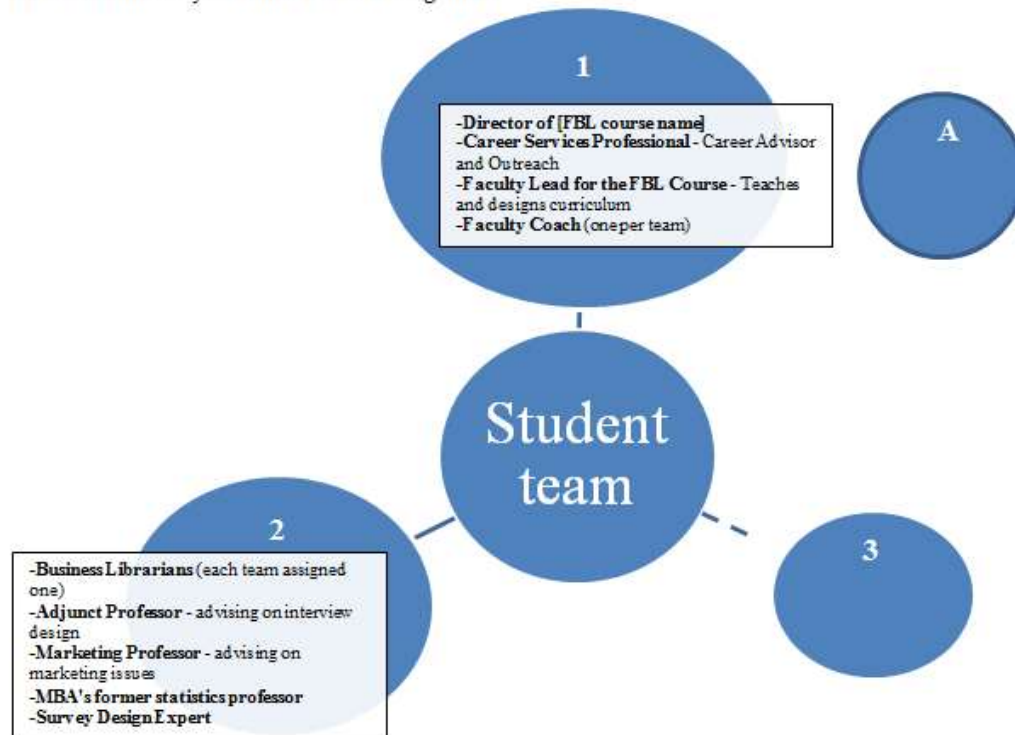
(On the subsequent pages are the models for the Six Case Study Institutions.)



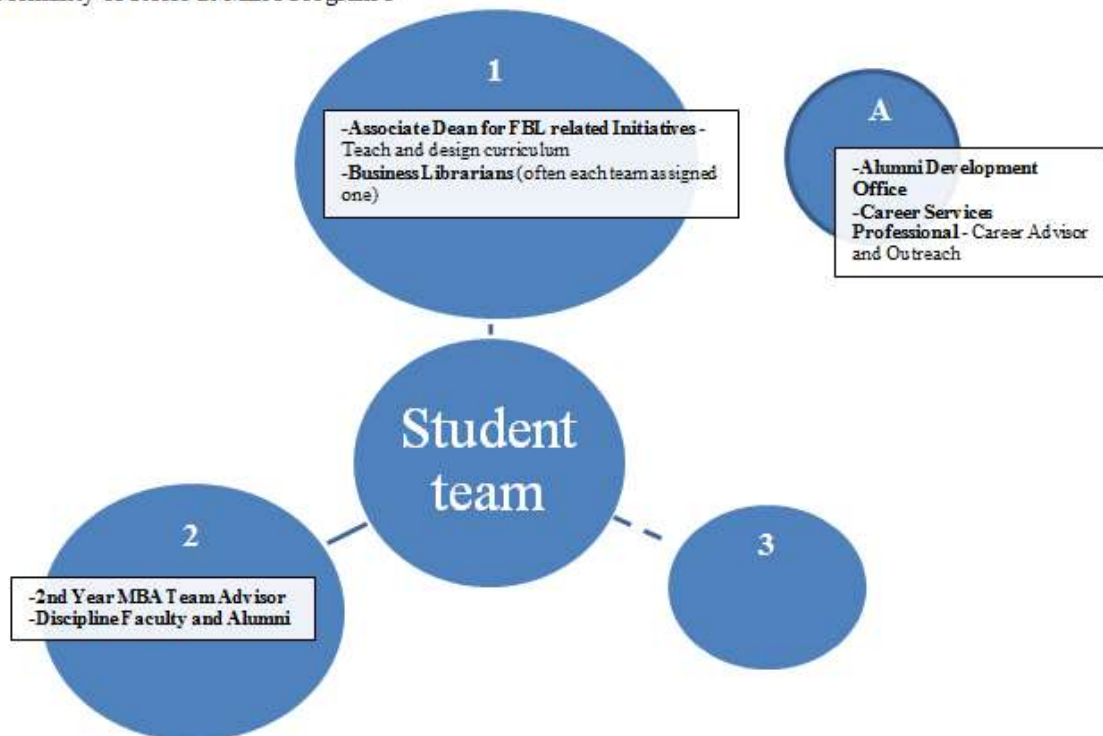
Level of Formality of Roles at MBA Program 1



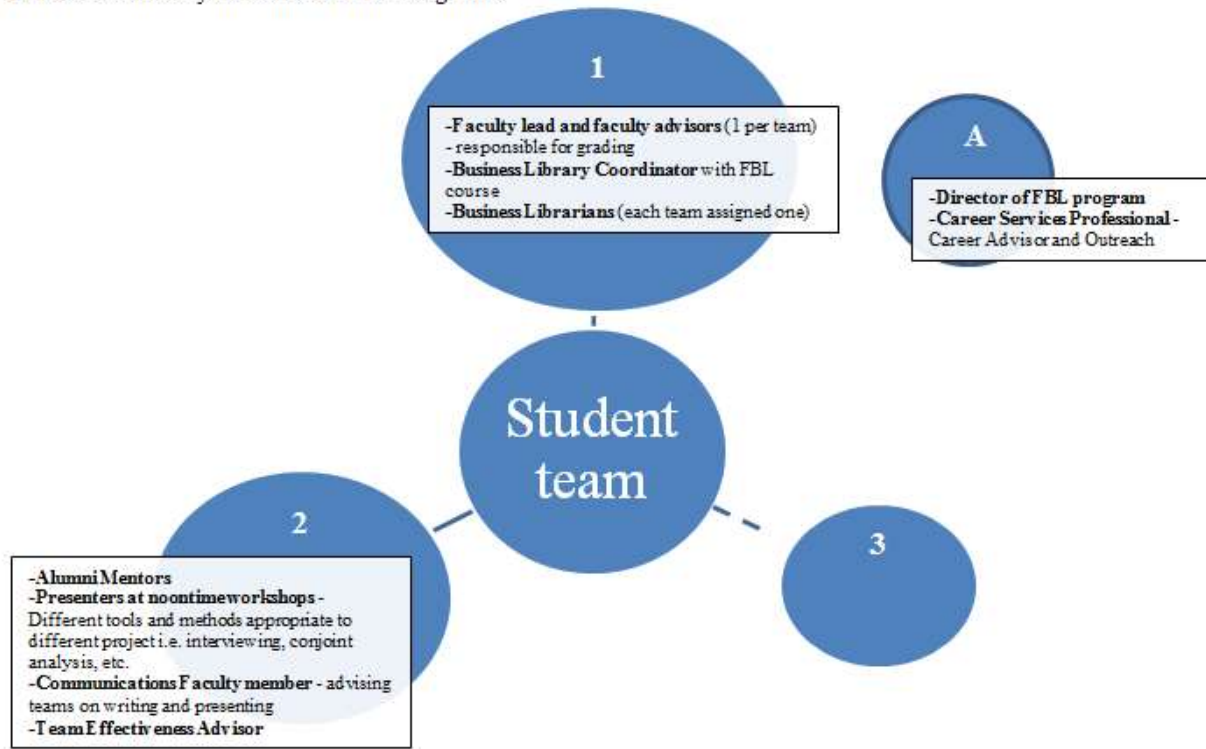
Level of Formality of Roles at MBA Program 2



Level of Formality of Roles at MBA Program 3



Level of Formality of Roles at MBA Program 4



APPENDIX B
TYPES AND NUMBER OF ROLES MENTIONED AT SIX MBA PROGRAMS

Types of Role=Administrators, Faculty, Team Advisors, Sponsors, Career, Business Librarians, Students, Alumni

Level of Formality (1=required; 2=discretionary; 3=rarely used; A=Program Advocate not working with student teams)

Type of Role	Role Description	School	Level of Formality	Number of Roles at each school
Administrators	Director of Strategic Curricular Networks - to identify contacts for the school for things like clients for FBL elective classes	MBA1	A	4
Business Librarian	Business Librarians		3	
Career	Career Services Professional - Career Advisor and Outreach		A	
Faculty	Course Professor - responsible for project grading		1	
Administrators	Director of [FBL course name]	MBA2	1	9
Business Librarian	Business Librarians (each team assigned one)		2	
Career	Career Services Professional - Career Advisor and Outreach		1	

Faculty	Faculty Lead for the FBL Course - Teaches and designs curriculum		1	
Faculty	Faculty Coach (one per team)		1	
Team Advisors	Adjunct professor advising on interview design		2	
Team Advisors	Marketing Professor advising on marketing issues		2	
Team Advisors	MBA student's former statistics professor		2	
Team Advisors	Survey Design Expert		2	
Alumni	Alumni Development Office	MBA3	A	6
Business Librarian	Business Librarians (often each team assigned one)		1	
Career	Career Services Professional - Career Advisor and Outreach		A	
Faculty	Associate Dean for FBL related Initiatives - teach and design curriculum		1	
Student	2nd Year MBA Team Advisor		2	
Team Advisors	Discipline Faculty and Alumni		2	
Administrators	Director of FBL program	MBA4	A	9
Alumni	Alumni Mentors		2	
Business Librarian	Business Library Coordinator with FBL course		1	
Business Librarian	Business Librarians (each team assigned one)		1	
Career	Career Services Professional - Career Advisor and Outreach		A	
Faculty	Faculty lead and faculty advisors (1 per team) - responsible for grading		1	
Team Advisors	Presenters at noontime workshops - Different tools and methods appropriate to different project i.e. interviewing, conjoint analysis, etc.		2	
Team Advisors	Communications Faculty member - advising teams on writing and presenting		2	
Team Advisors	Team Effectiveness Advisor		2	
Administrators	[FBL course name] Office Managing Director	MBA5	1	11
Administrators	Chief Learning Officer		A	
Administrators	Faculty Director of Action-based Learning (Across all business school programs not just MBA)		A	
Business Librarian	Librarians also called "Secondary Research Consultants" (Each team assigned one)		1	
Career	Career Coach and Outreach		A	
Faculty	2 full-time faculty advisors for each team project - one "non-travelling" and other "travelling" as		1	

	liaison to organization sponsoring the project. Both do grading.			
Student	2nd year MBA student peer advisor for each team (these individuals participate in a coaching course). Referred in one of the interviews as "MBA Two Coach"		2	
Team Advisors	Communications Consultants		1	
Team Advisors	One faculty member who is a research resource to students for construction and interview protocols.		2	
Team Advisors	Primary Research Coach		2	
Administrators	FBL Course Administrator	MBA6	1	7
Alumni	Alumni Development Office		A	
Business Librarian	Business Librarians		2	
Career	Career Services Professional - Career Advisor and Outreach		A	
Faculty	Course Professor - responsible for project grading		1	
Student	Team peer advising - If two or more teams are working on projects in the same area (e.g. brand loyalty programs) the faculty lead will arrange for those teams to meet to share what they've learned on the topic.		2	
Team Advisors	Area of Expertise Faculty, i.e. market branding		2	