Refocusing the Project Class on Partnering with the Client and Partnering with God

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ABSTRACT: *After extensive research, including a ten-year satisfaction survey, this paper presents a major shift in the pedagogy of teaching client-based project classes. Six new teaching strategies were implemented, specifically aimed at focusing marketing students on new partnering strategies to build equity in the client relationship. This resulted in superior marketing plans, highly satisfied students and clients, and a significantly greater percentage of the plan being implemented. Furthermore, spiritual integration occurred in and out of the classroom at a remarkable level as the refined class provided an ideal environment for students to partner with God.*

INTRODUCTION

Client-based project classes have long been utilized by business faculty to provide their students with real-world experience in the application of learned business related strategies. Local organizations provide a laboratory for real-world experience and, as a result, benefit from the recommendations that the students provide. Learning outcomes are often directed toward the final deliverables of recommendations for the client that come in the form of business or marketing plans. As a result, the primary focus of the student is to demonstrate his/her competence by providing a professional appearing document and secondary becomes serving the unique needs of the client. Said another way, the final deliverable of the marketing plan has become primary to focusing on the "process" of developing the actual plan itself. In these cases, clients are often left with an exquisite appearing plan containing a list of unrealistic and unfeasible recommendations. This reinforces to students a recurring phrase from the business arena that plans themselves are indeed worthless.

Although project classes may provide various forms of interaction with executive managers, there is little to no intentional focus on relationship building through the concept of "partnering." Partnering is a form of relationship marketing, involving personal selling strategies designed to build relationships (Tanner and Castleberry 1995). Students need to learn and experience relationship building skills prior to graduation and the research has shown that there is a gap here as there is minimal research regarding teaching partnering in our business education programs. Furthermore, there is little to nothing about merging the need for teaching and experiencing partnering through client-based projects. Client-based projects provide a unique opportunity and teaching laboratory for students to intentionally practice and experience the valuable skills of partnering. By intentionally focusing to understand clients' needs, above and below the surface, as well as thoroughly understanding the unique aspects of their organizational culture, students not only produce a better plan, but one that intentionally gives appropriate weight to the process of developing the plan.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the immense value and the intentional changes in the process that focused on partnering with the client as well as to examine the expected benefits and unexpected spiritual integration that occurred inside and outside the classroom as a result of the new pedagogy. Utilizing Non-Profit Marketing course as an example, six new teaching strategies were implemented, specifically aimed at focusing the marketing students on new partnering strategies to build equity in the client relationship. This resulted in superior marketing plans, highly satisfied students and clients, and a significantly greater percentage of the plan being implemented. As a result, a significant shift occurred in the pedagogy of this class that was thought to benefit both the students' relationship skills as well as better meet the marketing needs of the non-profit organizations' (NPO) clients.

The paper also examines the expected benefits and unexpected spiritual integration. Due to the difficulty and demands of project classes, they have the capability of playing a vital role in the intellectual and spiritual growth and maturity of business students. Although a student was already leaning on God in prior years of the project classes, the suggested intentional strategies put a greater emphasis on his/her spiritual growth. Furthermore, this spiritual integration occurred in and out of the classroom at a remarkable level as the refined class provided an ideal environment for students to partner with God. Specific teaching strategies are presented from various aspects of the class with the intent of presenting best practices that Christian business faculty could utilize in their own respective project classes.

BACKGROUND

For the last 16 years, client-based project courses have been an integral aspect of the undergraduate business-marketing curriculum at Biola University's Crowell School of Business. Students work independently, as opposed to group projects, to learn and apply various marketing strategies to a local organization. To clarify, these are individual projects where each student finds and works with a client of a local organization to meet its various need ranging from doing a comprehensive marketing research study to the development of a one-year marketing plan. Although other courses in the business curriculum have live projects, for these classes the projects serve as the primary focus upon which the class is built.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Project classes have been a successful and an appreciated aspect of our business program by both the students and the clients. In an effort for continual improvement, the client-based projects have been intentionally re-examined each year in order to seek out and strengthen specific areas in both the process and the plan itself. To substantiate this effort, commencing in 1999, a survey tool was administered to obtain objective information directly from the NPO clients at the project's conclusion; this included their working experience with the students, suggestions for improvement, and various aspects of satisfaction. The 43-question survey included demographic questions and importance/satisfaction questions assessing the value of specific sections of the report. The survey also had Likert scale questions that explored the perceived value of different components of the project experience, as well as several opportunities to provide qualitative suggestions and feedback.

The survey along with a cover letter from the instructor has been administered on an annual basis for the last 10 years (1999-2008). The survey is sent to the client through the mail approximately three months after receiving the marketing plan, accompanied with a $5 Starbucks gift card. The sample size includes 72 completed surveys that were collected over a 10-year period. With an average of 16 students per semester, this resulted in a response rate of approximately 45 percent.

Every year the quantitative and the qualitative feedback results were accumulated, examined, and trends were noted in order to provide valuable insights into improving the course. Although the surveys proved very valuable, a collection of research data from the author's personal interviews with clients and discussions with students also provided insights into improving the project process. In addition, much has been learned simply through the trial and error of various restructuring efforts of teaching assignments over the years. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with marketing alumni and literature review provided changes, which are outlined in this paper.

PROBLEMS & CHALLENGES THAT SURFACED

Addressing the 10-year results of the quantitative aspects of the survey, there is a relatively high level of satisfaction across the board (See Table 1: Results of the Importance and Satisfaction Questions) as well as throughout the Likert responses (See Table 2: Results of the Likert Scale Questions). The strongest evidence of satisfaction is that 97 percent of the clients surveyed agreed that they would recommend our program to another organization. Another relevant finding from the survey included a significant lack of previous marketing experience by many of the NPO clients. Almost 62 percent agreed that the project had helped them grow in their understanding of marketing. Additionally, nearly 60percent had worked at the NPO five or more years, and yet 57percent admitted to having a low level of marketing experience prior to the plan. These results reveal a great opportunity to come alongside a NPO client that has explicit needs in the realm of expertise that our business schools can meet.

Table 1: Results from the Importance and Satisfaction Questions (1999-2008)

Item	Mean/Std. Dev. Importance	Mean/Std. Dev. Satisfaction
Executive Summary	4.24 / .82	4.29 / .80
Monthly List of Activities	3.81 / 1.13	4.07 / .94
Student's Understanding of How Your Organization Functions	4.67 / .65	4.37 / .86
Close Relationship with Student	3.93 / 1.13	4.34 / .98
Feasibility of Recommendations	4.28 / .94	4.06 / .78
Reliability of Recommendations	4.34 / .76	4.18 / .72

Table 2: Results from the Likert Scale Questions (1999-2008)

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	% Who agreed
The recommendations in the marketing plan were very useful.	4.23	.72	89.2
The recommendations made by the student were reasonable.	4.21	.65	91.9
The section "Monthly List of Activities" made it easier to implement the recommendations.	3.85	.75	56.7
The marketing plan should be shorter in length.	2.96	.91	25.7
It would be very helpful for the student to better explain the sections of the marketing plan when they hand it in.	3.03	.94	32.4
I would have preferred to have the student continue working for my organization to help implement their recommendations.	4.07	.87	71.6
The student should have spent more time at my organization to gain a greater understanding of it.	2.62	1.14	21.6
My organization has enough employees to implement the recommendations made by the student.	2.48	1.14	23
My organization has the budget to implement the recommendations made by the student.	2.58	1.06	24.4
Marketing Planning is valuable to my organization	4.49	.59	81
Resulting from Marketing Plan, I feel more confident in my job performance	3.42	.80	32.5
The project helped me grow in my understanding of marketing	3.82	.92	63.5

However, as the survey results initially unfolded, concerns grew over the low percentage of the marketing plan that was actually being implemented by the NPO. For example, regarding the first five years of the study (1999-2003), the cumulative results of 36 surveys showed that less than 20 percent of the NPO clients stated that they had implemented over 60 percent of the plan. Qualitative feedback suggested that the main reasons for this included (1) a lack of student knowledge of the problems that existed below the surface and (2) recommendations that were not realistic due to budget constraints and/or lack of human resources to implement. Furthermore, during those first five years of the study, only 16 percent agreed that they had enough employees to implement the recommendations and only 19 percent said they had the budget to implement the recommendations. A common sentiment expressed by a client from the survey stated, "The student didn't have a grasp of our budget concerns or a realistic time frame in getting things done." Another client stated, "I wasn't sure if the student was interested in our goals as much as his solutions." One of the author's hypothesis for these problems centered around the notion that students were more focused on presenting solutions to complete their plan as opposed to coming alongside the client and thoroughly understanding the problems that existed in the non-profit organization.

In addition, anecdotal data from interviews of several non-profit administrators over time suggested that they had become frustrated working with local business schools on marketing-related projects. These comments were often directed toward group projects, where the NPO clients found themselves dealing with multiple students who would ask the same questions repetitively. The final deliverable received by the NPO client often consisted of a list of rather shallow and unrealistic recommendations that usually dealt with only one aspect of the organization; as a result, other vital aspects of the NPO were ignored by the students. Clients simply stated that they were fed up with "drive-by student projects." This is disturbing since many non-profit organizations still do not fully understand the fundamentals of marketing, which is often one of their most important success factors (Petkus, 2000). Although the non-profit sector has expressed a great need for assistance, clients suggested that the primary beneficiaries of the group projects were actually the students, namely their grades and final presentations to their faculty and peers.

A NEED FOR EXPERIENCING PARTNERING

Undergraduate education is often described as long on concepts and theory and short on application (Diamond, Koernig & Iqbal, 2008). Although it is necessary for students to be able to demonstrate proficiency in the process of strategy development, it is also vital to not only learn but to experience relationship-building skills. In our current business courses, there may be a discussion about how trust is built and what it may even possibly look like in a corporate setting, but students' opportunities to experience relationship building skills prior to graduation are often limited. Specifically, they need to learn and practice skills of partnering that will be effective within the existing internal culture in which those strategies will be implemented. Partnering is a form of relationship marketing designed to build relationships (Tanner and Castleberry 1995), where the process of partnering has been described as a trust-building process (Swan & Nolan 1985). For example, in a B2B context, partnering puts the emphasis on building relationships rather than making short term sales (Weitz & Bradford 1999).

Project classes provide students with an opportunity to move from talking about how to build trust to actually investing time and energy into building the relationship (Tanner and Castleberry 1995). Client-based projects literally force students to learn and immediately apply business strategies with a live client who has real problems and issues. The project is highly motivating to the students, encouraging them to be active participants in the learning process (Humphreys 1981).

Although internships and class projects may provide various forms of interaction with executive/managers, there is little to no intentional focus on relationship building. However, students experiencing a relationship with a real-world client during the development of marketing strategies is inherently valuable. Not just observing the client experience, but specific interactions must be required that are aimed at building trust equity in the client/student relationship. Acquiring these skills through real-world experiences prior to graduation provides business students with a compelling advantage in the marketplace. Furthermore, for our Christian business students, another advantage of partnering is to experience an interpersonal level of serving. Specifically, they are using their learned business skills, their interpersonal problem \-solving skills, and their empowered heart to serve.

Six new, intentional strategies were implemented into the project class from 2004-2008. These strategies, which are discussed in the next sections are (1) A New Process Of

Partnering With God To Find The Client, (2) Refocusing The Goals Of The Marketing Audit Through Minimizing Situation Questions, (3) Increased Requirement Of Primary Stakeholder Research, (4) Client Drafts Of Proposed Strategies, (5) Going To The "Pain" In The Organization, and (6) Replacing Accountability Groups With Advisory Groups.

SIX INTENTIONAL NEW PARTNERING STRATEGIES

1. A New Process Of Partnering With God To Find The Client

Past Approach. The first significant change occurred with the entire process of obtaining the client. In the past, students were given approximately two weeks to secure an NPO client who wanted a marketing plan. The instructor would urge students to go out and "pound the pavement" in order secure an NPO client as soon as possible so that work could begin on the marketing plan. Students were directed to Internet resources that listed existing non-profits in the area. Class prayer time accompanied this process and students were provided spiritual formation exercises that focused on finding a client for them to consider as they went about this process.

New Partnering Strategy. Since 2004, students have been encouraged to spend significant time at the very beginning of the semester focusing on what type of areas in the non-profit sector that they care about and would want to serve. Instead of getting the first available NPO client, students are now given four weeks to secure a client that literally "touches their heart" with the goal of seeking out an emotional connection with a local NPO. In addition, students are told it is wise to select an industry in which they have an interest (Marcus, 1979). The students are required to generate their own list of potential clients and meet with a minimum of five different NPOs before determining their final choice. Students are given spiritual formation assignments that encourage them to spend significant time alone in the presence of the Spirit, deeply reflecting about the class and the project. To assist in these prayer assignments, students are provided selected readings from Henri Nouwen's The Way of the Heart and Devotional Classics from Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith. They are also given handouts on the "How to do Lectio Divina" that also include suggested places in Scripture, often in Psalms. In addition, students are required to read Jim Cymbala's Fresh Wind Fresh Fire, an excellent book on prayer that is discussed in class during this initial period.

Students eager to get started on the marketing plan are instead encouraged to have the faith to let go of a "convenient" client; instead, they are encouraged to pursue a client where there is an emotional connection. The desire of the instructor is that the students take this opportunity of finding a client as an exercise in trusting God. One way to help facilitate this spiritual exercise is to focus the students on areas of hope in their own lives and those that they love. For the last five years, the class has studied one of my favorite places in Scripture from the book of Hosea where the Lord, after rebuking Israel for its unfaithfulness, surprisingly declares, "There I will give her back her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15). The Valley of Achor symbolized one of the lowest and most discouraging points in Israel's young history. The Israelites were on the heels of a powerful victory in Jericho, and had to abruptly confront one of their own, Achan, who had stolen plunder during the capture of Jericho. He and his entire family were stoned to death in what came to be known as the Valley of Achor. (Joshua 7:25-26). Hosea's mention of the Valley of Trouble is an "attempt to demonstrate the even such an ill-fated place can be transformed" (Walton, Matthews and Chavalas 2000). Many NPO's have become these "doors of hope," whether directly or indirectly, in the lives of so many people in our communities. With this goal in mind, students are asked to pray and intentionally seek out sectors in the non-profit industry from their personal experience that are doors of hope in their own Valley of Achors.

The result of the students' willingness to take on this task has been astonishing as they have experienced God's faithfulness and love in new and powerful ways. For example, one female student who had struggled with eating disorders actively sought out NPO's that served this precise group of young ladies. Another student had a sibling who struggled with drug and alcohol abuse and found an NPO that provided family counseling for this epidemic. One student whose Christian parents had just recently divorced found a program that specialized in adolescent grief counseling. Several students who either personally experienced various forms of abuse or had loved ones that had suffered from it found various shelters, education programs, and even group homes for abused kids. One young lady, who had a heart for inner-city ministry, spoke of how she immediately began crying as she stepped into an after-school program held in a renovated garage in the middle of the toughest part of town. Even some of the students who were uncomfortable discussing the idea of organizations close to their hearts were willing to give this a try. After prayer and a refocus of priorities, some young men found themselves making a commitment to leave their comfort zones and seek what God had in store for them. One young man recalled watching a team of Down Syndrome kids play basketball at halftime at a school game two years prior to the class. He remembers being touched by merely watching the kids play this simple game. Through his own research, he found the name of the organization and ended up diligently serving them through the semester with his marketing plan. This quote describes the importance of being motivated to help others: "Without an underlying motivation to influence others so as to make a difference in the world, the integration of faith and learning is just a sterile academic exercise" (Webb, 1997). This experience is a reminder to both students and the instructor to call on the powerful name of the Lord (Cymbala, 1997).

Rationale. In observing past projects over the last 16 years, the better done projects are usually accompanied by a meaningful connection between the student and the client. The rationale is that when a student chooses to work with an NPO because of their emotional connection to that particular NPO's mission, they tend to take greater ownership of their own learning. This results in greater satisfaction and overall performance (Marcus 1979). More importantly, their motives for choosing the specific organization are then communicated in the initial inquiry meeting with the potential NPO client. Clients, who are often the founders of these NPOs, are usually very open to a student who has intentionally picked their organization for reasons beyond academic credit. It appears to reinforce the phrase that people care more about what you have to say when they know that you care. Furthermore, this innovation in teaching strategy has proven to be a technique that demonstrates a student's authentic commitment to the NPO client. Emotional connection with the client organization provides better results and perseverance in the long and hard process of developing the marketing plan.

2. Refocusing The Goals Of The Marketing Audit Through Minimizing Situation Questions

Problems with Past Approach. Shortly after securing the client, the student typically sits across from him/her with the marketing plan outline in hand and asks a list of questions to complete the situation analysis. As suggested in the book SPIN Selling, situation questions are "essential, but they do not benefit the client because he/she is only communicating what they already know" (Rackman 67-71). When an over-worked, underpaid NPO administrator sets aside two hours in their busy schedule to merely provide information for a student, it can easily damage the relationship beyond repair. In that case, the student is no longer seen as a marketing helper, but as someone they do not have time to deal with on a consistent basis.

New Partnering Strategy. Class time is devoted to brainstorming ways of making the initial meetings value-based contacts rather than a Q & A session. Students write out goals for the initial meetings that go beyond merely obtaining research. One example is focusing on how the student can demonstrate preparedness and professionalism in the initial meetings. Students are also instructed on how to minimize the asking of situation questions, such as "How long have you been in business?" or "What is your mission statement?" Instead, students are taught to gather the situation questions mostly from secondary sources and other existing resources and to focus their time on asking the NPO client problem-related questions. One of the best ways to enhance these initial meetings is to prepare questions that encourage the client to tell stories. For example, they can ask the client: "How did you become involved with this NPO? What are some of your success stories?" Another question they could ask is: "Do you feel that the current mission statement accurately communicates what is unique and valuable about their NPO? Why?"

Rationale. The first couple of client meetings in the semester are critical in establishing trust. The typical client is still assessing the student to measure his/her perceived value. Also, these meetings can be encouraging for the students who place a high value on this type of realism and relevance (Stiff 1982). The clients sense a level of professionalism when the student comes to the initial meetings equipped with pre-existing knowledge about the organization and valuing the client's precious commodity of time. This is an excellent way to secure and assure the client that the student is very serious about coming alongside to serve their NPO

3. Increased Requirement Of Primary Stakeholder Research

Past Approach. Marketing plans had relied too heavily on the client's pre-existing knowledge and not enough on valuable information from other stakeholders. It became clear that some students were literally "using" the NPO clients to obtain the minimum amount of research data in order to complete the primary objective of finishing the marketing plan. One client put it this way, "There was little outside research to back up our suggestions, and hence there were no real new strategies." The results of this limited research were often unrealistic recommendations that were quickly dismissed by clients.

New Partnering Strategy. Another deliberate strategy increased the requirement for collecting extensive primary research through in-depth interviews from the NPO stakeholders. Secondary research through Internet articles and reviewing competitor Web sites can indeed be very valuable. However, primary research consisting of interviews with current end-users, potential/existing donors, alumni of the program, existing employees, volunteers, board members, etc. is probably the key characteristic of successful non-profit marketing plans. This added research greatly strengthens the goal of partnering with the client through two crucial guidelines that accompany all research conducted by the student. First, all research requests must first go through the proper chain of command so that the NPO administrator is aware of the research objectives. This way, they can actually help facilitate the research process. Due to the nature of many NPOs, confidentiality plays a crucial role and some stakeholders are not willing to be interviewed. A respect for the chain of command is absolutely necessary.

Secondly, valuable in-depth interview guides are tweaked by the students and converted to professionally written satisfaction surveys for the client to administer long after the student has completed the plan. For example, it is typical for the final deliverable to have three to five customized satisfaction surveys for various stakeholders to assist in building an up-and-running, current system of stakeholder feedback coming to the administrator. In regard to the focus on research, one client said, "We now evaluate via survey everything we do for our clients. The feedback has made us a stronger organization and our clients believe that we really want to make a difference." Another client stated in the survey, "Our numbers have doubled in size since implementing the surveys and using the information to deliver an excellent product…the increased focus on our ideal customer resulted in a higher success rate of recruiting more and better qualified mission teams with less wasted energy."

Rationale. Nothing gives more credibility to the overall marketing plan, the students' work, and the NPO client than quality research that has been gathered and that substantiates the suggested recommendations. This is a crucial stage in the process of developing the plan and in strengthening the client relationship. Clients experience firsthand the actual ownership that the student is taking in providing this marketing service for them. It is a great hands-on research experience for students as they develop customized questions in interviewing a wide spectrum of individuals associated with the NPO. This type of research greatly expands the scope of the project in the eyes of the marketing student, and it often provides the NPO client with data that they were unaware of and/or had avoided asking.

4. Client Drafts Of Proposed Strategies

Past Approach. The first time clients would actually see recommendations for their organization would not be until the end of the semester banquet, in which they would receive a very professional copy of their one-year marketing plan. Typically, the NPO clients were very appreciative of the work that was done and impressed with the size of the marketing plan. Since it would possibly be the last contact with the student, there was not any significant feedback regarding the validity or feasibility of the marketing recommendations. Qualitative results from the client survey suggested that they were receiving marketing plans with recommendations that the client felt were either not feasible and/or had already been tried and failed. For example, two days before the project was due, a very high achieving student who had worked diligently on her marketing plan for a children's museum decided to turn her plan in early to the NPO. She was devastated while reviewing the plan with her client, who rejected nearly all of the recommendations as ones that they had already tried or could not afford.

New Partnering Strategy. One of the most significant innovations implemented for the purposes of partnering is the reviewing of drafts with the client on three separate occasions during the semester-long process as shown in steps of 7, 9 and 12 of Figure 1. (Figure 1 presents an overview of the major steps in the plan process.) The process suggests that the instructor review the drafts with the students, who would then make the necessary revisions prior to meeting with the client (Lopez & Lee 2005). Upon completion of the revisions, the student makes an appointment with the client to review the draft and elicit feedback concerning the feasibility and desirability of the various conclusions and recommendations. The word "DRAFT" is at the top of the first page so that the client understands that everything written is in pencil, not pen. These meetings have become an integral part in fostering partnering relationships with the clients; students learn and

Figure 1: Overview of the Major Steps in the Plan Process

1. Prayer process looking for client
2. Finding and securing client
3. Begin secondary research
4. Continue primary research of stakeholders throughout the entire process
5. Conduct marketing audit
6. Develoop situation analysis & SWOT development (Draft #1)
7. Review Draft #1 with instructor & with client
8. Develop marketing objectives, internal & external strategies (Draft #2)
9. Review Draft #2 with instructor & with client
10. Conduct promotion and fund raising audit
11. Develop promotion & fund raising strategies. (Draft #3)
12. Review Draft #3 with instructor & with client
13. Final plan development
14. Provide final copy to client at non-profit banquet

negotiate the "buy in" of strategies along the process of developing the plan.

5. Going To The "Pain" In The Organization

Past Approach. The primary objective of the course was for the student to complete a comprehensive marketing plan in which all sections outlined in the syllabus had to be addressed in an adequate fashion. This meant that students would spend an equal amount of time and effort on areas of the plan in which the NPO may not have needed the greatest amount of help. This resulted in lengthier marketing plans that contained an extensive amount of information that the clients felt was unnecessary and/or irrelevant.

New Partnering Strategy. As a result of the initial primary and secondary research, an extensive situation analysis is completed, and the student prepares a marketing area analysis. Areas that need improvement are listed and discussed with the client. Upon mutual agreement and negotiation of the assessment, the primary purpose of the remainder of the entire marketing plan is now customized to focus principally on those areas that need to be improved. This partnering strategy encourages the student to identify the areas of "pain" in the organization and to address those issues first and foremost. For example, if the NPO tends to underutilize volunteers, then it would be expected that the student would put additional efforts into the "Volunteers Strategies" section of the plan. Obviously, if this area were already strong, then they would state this and move on to other areas of "pain" that exist in the organization.

Rationale. This makes the final deliverable much more valuable for the clients since they do not have to wade through pages of material that are not perceived to be helpful. This also provides excellent experience for the student in developing a problem-solving focus as a marketer. This aspect of the teaching innovation implies greater flexibility by the instructor, who encourages marketing plans to focus on areas where there is the greatest need or where improvement is most critical. Grading criteria were adjusted to include primary areas of focus and the students' ability to present relevant strategies to meet those needs.

6. Replacing Accountability Groups with Advisory Group

Past Approach. For several years, the instructor had accountability groups in place to make sure that all students stayed on track. Although valuable for some, they tended to add a degree of legalism to students who were in a season where they needed more grace. Students remained hungry for a safe place to unload their frustrations and receive prayer from their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

New Partnering Strategy. As more work was given to the students, it became evident that a group was needed to provide more than just accountability for the completion of assignments; they also needed mutual encouragement and an exchange of marketing ideas. One of the most effective ways of dealing with these issues is the creation of student advisory groups that typically consist of three to four students who meet regularly throughout the semester in and out of the classroom. It is typical in the last 15 minutes of class to have students go into their groups to debrief on what they have heard and plan the next steps that are necessary in the process of developing the plan. This community is integral to students receiving valuable input in preparing for client meetings, as well as learning from what other students share in their group. Furthermore, it is quite common for the group to spend significant time praying for one another in regard to the class, as well as all issues of life. It has been fascinating and quite rewarding to see the degree to which the students have come to depend on these advisory groups. In addition, some of the valuable aspects of group dynamics that can be lost in individual projects are now being utilized in these communities in a powerful way. As one student stated, "The community that was built through this class is indescribable, it is something I will never forget. It is rare to be in a typically competitive class environment and to have other students come alongside you to help make your project better."

Rationale. Advisory groups offer several benefits to the students, the instructor, the clients, and future NPOs themselves. For the students, high levels of stress are incurred from completing the plan as well as working with clients, who have other priorities. Advisory groups offer a sanctuary to pray for one another, to vent frustrations, and to provide their own input on problems and issues with the marketing plans. For the instructor, the advisory groups provide another place for the students to dialogue about their questions and issues besides the faculty office. Clients benefit as well because the advisory groups typically improve the morale and attitude of the students. Accompanied with valuable insights from the other students in their group, the advisory community helps the student to do a better job partnering with the needs of their client.

EXPECTED IMPROVEMENTS FROM THE NEW PARTNERING STRATEGIES

This section compares and contrasts the research findings from the client, student feedback, and extant literature of the areas that were expected to improve as a result of the implementation of new partnering strategies. It was expected that partnering strategies would enhance both the students' experiences and the value to the clients. Although some are inherent benefits of project classes, the addition of partnering strategies in the last five years has seen these improvements grow dramatically.

Higher Rate of Implementation. As a result of three of the new partnering strategies (connecting with the client, enhanced research, and reviewing the marketing strategies together), it was expected that the clients would be more willing to receive and utilize the marketing plan. One of the primary evidences of the success of these teaching innovations is that in the last five years (2004 – 2008) nearly 42 percent stated that they implemented 60 percent or more of the marketing plan. This is a significant improvement from the first five years of the study (1999-2003), when only 19 percent stated that they implemented 60 percent or more. One client's comments included, "Excellent process, excellent outcome, quality effort by quality people – praise the Lord." Another client stated, "It helped us to see how to think in our organization in marketing terms. Even if the plan is not in 100 percent use, we still learned a lot of value through the process." Each recommendation in the marketing plan, whether big or small, now includes a rationale so that regardless of the reader, they will know precisely what the recommendation was based upon. Due to the partnering strategies, the plans are shorter and more user-friendly. Because of the increased research, students are encouraged, for example, to utilize specific names of individuals in the NPO that are responsible for implementation, as well as provide examples of how the implementation process can begin.

New Partnering Strategies Increase Students' Confidence. Experiential learning is effective learning that results from students being actively involved with an experience and then reflecting on that precise experience

(Frontczak and Kelley 2000). The projects provide situations where great learning can occur and can accurately reflect the reality of the business world that students will experience in the near future. Over the 16 years of these class projects, students have gained tremendous amounts of confidence from successfully completing these real-world business projects. This is consistent with the literature that suggests that students demonstrate higher levels of learning and self-confidence as a result of client-sponsored projects (Ramocki, 1987). One student stated, "This class was a real-life experience; I truly helped my client, and I gained confidence in my marketing and business skills."

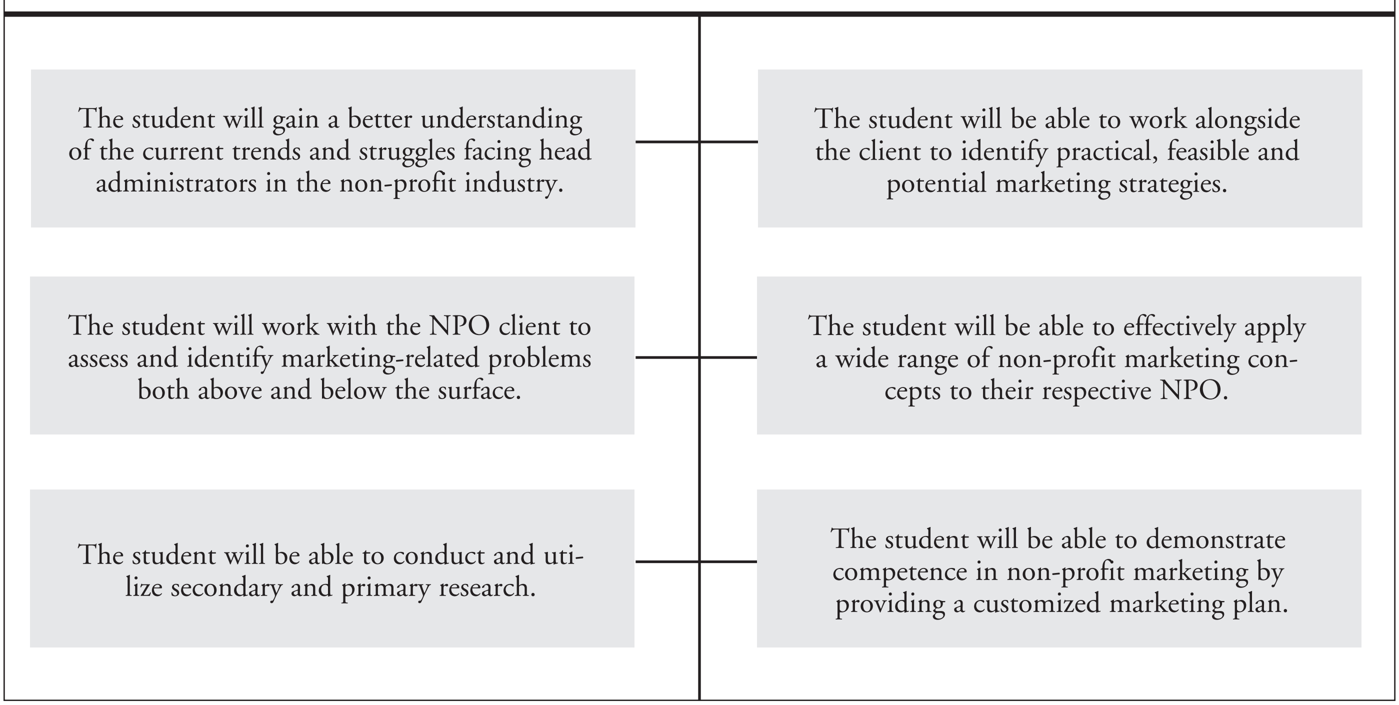
However, due to the new partnering strategies implemented, it appears that there has been even a greater degree of confidence built from the process of completing the projects. For example, due to the extended amount of research and going to the "pain" of the organization that must now be completed, students have a better understanding and more examples of the details that occur within the NPO. Another student commented, "This class has impacted my academic experience in a great way as well as my faith. This hands-on experience has given me confidence to go out into the business world." These types of student comments are becoming more common due to the improved real-life interactions and negotiations that now occur over the semester. Furthermore, as a Christian instructor, I watch with amazement the way students rely on God and have the faith to persevere and navigate through the difficult waters of their experiential projects. These new goals of the partnering strategies are reflected in the in Figure 2: Learning Outcomes for the Non-Profit Marketing Course.

Students Take Ownership of their Learning. A major advantage of the project is that it is highly motivating to most students, encouraging them to become active participants rather than spectators in the learning process (Humphreys, 1981). Motivation changes as a result of ownership, since mere activities do not produce meaningful learning (Smith & Van Doren, 2004).

Due to the new process of how they initially find their client, students have become deeply invested and feel as though they are now an actual part of the NPO. As a result they often go above and beyond when working on these marketing projects. An example of a typical student comment is, "This class helped me get out of my comfort zone in a powerful way. I had to build a relationship with my client while also trying to show them areas of weakness in their organization. I believe I will be able to use this experience greatly throughout my future."

Impressed Potential Employers. "The lack of strategic problem-solving training in undergraduate marketing represents an obstacle that must be overcome in the search for a first job (Diamond, Koernig & Iqbal 2008)." It was expected that upon graduation potential employers in

Figure 2: Learning Outcomes for Non-Profit Marketing Course



the interview process would be impressed with a student who has experienced partnering skills as well as capable of completing a one-year marketing plan. Unlike observing a group project plan where a potential employer may actually question the actual contribution of the student, it is evident who completed the work for an individual project.

Students could demonstrate that they are self-starters who can work in unstructured environments and that they possess valuable relationship management skills and a great deal of perseverance. In the midst of the interviews, these attributes are evidenced in the impressive stories told from their experiences during the project. Employers were also pleased with the number of students making numerous "cold calls" in the initial four weeks in order to choose their client and the students have this valuable experience for many entry-level sales jobs.

NEW PARTNERING STRATEGIES AND SPIRITUAL MATURITY

The central aim of Christian education is the promotion of Christian maturity (Wilhoit, 1986). Spiritual maturity often occurs in some of the most stressful, demanding situations where one acknowledges the absolute necessity of depending on God to get through the process. The most effective, efficient means for spiritual integration in any discipline occurs when students are intentionally placed into real-life situations that require them to recognize their own limitations and to acknowledge that without God's help, they will surely sink. It is at this place, usually occurring outside of the classroom, that their encounter with the true living Spirit of God emerges powerfully as they begin to see their respective projects through a new pair of glasses. In this state of desperation, uncertainty and hopefulness, clenched fists open up for Holy help.

The instructor was amazed at how God chose to use different project experiences to transform student lives and make them more confident in the Lord. When students hear stories from fellow classmates about God's perfect timing, specifically the orchestration of perfectly placed events, their faith in God is strengthened. Stories of others who are actively seeking God despite disappointments and frustrations have a powerful impact on the students. Spiritual integration that occurs in the mind as well as the heart is what the instructor desires, and is precisely what the students need.

Furthermore, as a result of trusting God and experiencing Him during their project work, they are more open to invite God into other areas of their lives. One student put it this way, "I learned so much through this class. I found a passion in myself I didn't know I had. I learned to trust the Lord! I gained some amazing friendships! I learned that I am capable of accomplishing great things with the Lord's strength! Positively affecting lives is not something that God reserves for heroes; he wants us all to be great, and we just have to allow him to make us great."

Along with the students sharing their journeys of finding a client and choosing a particular sector of the non-profit industry, there was an unexpected level of transparency among the students that created a strong bond of unity. Students were encouraged to voluntarily share anything in class discussion about their own journey. This often meant disclosing personal aspects of their lives. Consequently, the students would ask if they could take a moment in class to pray for some of the concerns that had been shared. Prayer time would lead to more transparency, which led to more unity in the class as they prayed about making an impact on their clients, stakeholders, and the community as a whole.

Another example of spiritual maturity was the rearranging of priorities. The marketing major is known throughout the School of Business to be very demanding and difficult. The reputations of the "project" classes and the famous "hundred-page plans" are communicated throughout the business school. With that said, the marketing major typically attracts over-achieving, highly competitive students who place a great priority on their grades. As a result, it is tempting for students to find easier, more convenient NPO's which they are confident to navigate and secure their expected "A" grade around. However, the new partnering strategy of seeking out an organization that elicited an emotional connection invited the students to walk into something bigger than themselves. This strategy often meant that the students would be setting their own control issues and grade expectations aside, replacing them with a willingness to work with NPO's that are financially unstable or even located in inconvenient areas. It is surprising to see a great number of students intentionally walk in faith and experience blessings through their endeavors.

Since most students take this course during their final semester, it was common to face a great deal of "senior-itis," namely laziness. This season of the student's life is often characterized by a nonchalant, selfish attitude that is only concerned with marking a class off a checklist, graduating and landing an entry-level position. Instead, there was a refocusing of their efforts by serving Jesus, who is the antithesis of selfishness. To the instructor's delight, students increased their ability to empathize intellectually and emotionally with their NPO (Smith, Steen & Vanderveen

2006). It is important for the students to discover and understand the various struggles facing administrators in the non-profit industry, and to increase their appreciation for the vital role that NPO's play in society. One student said, "By having a real client, I actually genuinely cared for the project and the organization. I felt like I was making a difference in the lives of the client and even the customers. It was a great way to witness, too, because nobody does anything for free. I planted a seed, which is a start. God did so much through this class and I know I had my client for a reason."

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHING

Transformational teaching not only improves teaching but leads to a natural integration of Christian faith with the education process (Howard, 1997, Bovee & O'Brien 2007). In the last few years teaching this class, I discovered a much bigger story occurring besides the development of one-year marketing plans. With so many teachable moments that arise in these experiential projects, it became evident that this class was becoming a tool in the process of maturing and transforming our business students.

Yet, there is no doubt that client projects also involve more risk than is inherent in other teaching methods (Santos & Jensen 1985). Throughout the semester, the instructor of a project class should expect to hear several student complaints about the time commitment required, as well as clients who do not respond or put up walls that prevent research. There is no doubt that there will be plenty of "fires" that need to be put out. Therefore, the question remains: Is it worth the time and effort? With a lot of work and other life pressures, why would one take on this self-inflicting pressure of this type of pedagogy?

I am reminded that the challenge for us as Christian faculty is to make faith development practical, active, and external (Fowler et al. 2006). There is no better way to teach sacrificial giving and serving than to have students actually do it. We must recognize the immense value for the students, who have taken on a degree of uncertainty and are persevering through it. Furthermore, as instructors of project classes, we must be able to give ourselves the needed grace that we often show to our students. We need this grace when things do not work out as planned; we do not always have the answers, and we need to learn not to place the burden of those expectations on ourselves. Each year brings more encouragement than the previous one, and while the projects do not get any easier, we handle them better because our own faith grows as we see God working in significant ways in the lives of our students.

We also need to remember that the burden of learning and the integration of faith do not rest on our shoulders. "The Holy Spirit is working to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control"(Gal 5:22-23) in the life of the Christian who depends upon him. In this process of spiritual renewal, the Holy Spirit is making the Christian teacher a better teacher. Are there any teachers out there who do not need more patience, kindness or love for their pupils? The Holy Spirit is at work to deepen the Christian teacher's spiritual insight, compassion, and goodness" (Wilhoit, 1986).

Lastly, we need to seek out the wisdom of others who have walked this path of transformational teaching before us. Transformational teachers are people of vision; they know how to engage their students, are committed to values, and seek growth in themselves and others (Howard, 1997). "The transformational approach can provide a sense of purpose and direction that will enable one to have a 'ministry of meaning.' Educators who take this approach view the process of promoting spiritual growth and maturity as both a divine and human affair" (Wihoit, 1986).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research effort, there are limitations. In regard to the survey, it was an exploratory study that was conducted to identify the level of clients' satisfaction and to obtain valuable ideas and insights into how to improve the process from the clients' perspective. Although the presented data does speak well to the original paradigm that was in place, the precise teaching strategies of "partnering" were not directly tested. In other words, when the focus in and out of the class was altered, the survey instrument itself remained the same and in some areas did not adequately address issues surrounding the partnering issue. However, the qualitative data speaks more than adequately to key issues that initially directed the gradual change in pedagogy. Future client research objectives will intentionally aim to test variables of the new model presented in this paper. This upcoming research will include introducing new variables, such as the direct relationship between aspects of partnering variables and the implementation of the plan. In addition, the updated survey instrument will also examine student perceptions of the partnering process. Future research will also include change by moving the satisfaction ratings from a five-point scale to a ten-point scale. Furthermore, the Likert scale questions will be moved from a five- to a seven-point scale to provide greater variance if there was a tendency to give favorable scores.

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