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A Framework for Incorporating Case Writing Assignments in Graduate Agribusiness Courses

ABSTRACT: Case studies have been the primary tool utilized for enhancing experiential learning in agribusiness courses. The case analysis technique of instruction can be made even more vivid and profound for students when they are involved in the actual gathering of data and writing of cases. The procedures and experiences of actually writing cases, and more specifically involving students in writing new case studies, are not addressed in the existing agribusiness literature. This article relates the case writing activity to the changing profile of agribusiness education and the desirable characteristics of graduates. It also utilizes a specific example to illustrate the issues of class composition and course requirements; and develops a framework for integrating case writing in graduate courses.

Recently, agribusiness programs have sought to provide students with relevant experiential learning opportunities (i.e., internships and co-ops) or "learning through experience." Typically, programs seek to achieve the experiential learning opportunities through real experiences obtained in company internship programs, or other cooperative programs with industry. Additionally, students can obtain experiential learning opportunities through the use of published comprehensive type cases analyzed in classrooms. They do this by being placed in the role of a critical manager or other decision maker. In the past, the major emphasis in agricultural economics programs has been on classroom instruction as the primary method of delivery. Currently, it is not uncommon for agribusiness or business school courses to use case studies and analysis to approximate the reality of being

in the decision-maker's position. These factors have resulted in increased demand for these educational materials and techniques which traditionally have been used more often in Colleges of Business than in agricultural programs. The interest in using these teaching tools is indicated by the growing number of publications in journals and presentations at professional meetings (Harrison and Kennedy, 1996; Higgins and Vincze, 1989; House and Van Duren 1997).

The many strengths and benefits of the case method of instruction are widely documented (Mazzocco, 1995). In a case analysis, students take an active role and are placed vicariously into managerial decision-making positions where they have to understand the situation and then suggest some plan of action for the organization. For case method of instruction, the process of moving through the steps of alternative generation and decision selection is important. The focus of previous literature has been on utilizing the published cases for class discussions (Cox and Cox, 1984). The experiential advantage of the case analysis technique of instruction can be made even more vivid and profound for students when they are involved in the actual gathering of data and writing of cases. The procedures and experiences of writing cases, and more specifically involving students in writing new case studies, are not addressed in the existing literature. Although there has been some scattered attention to crafting cases or using "live" cases (McCain and Lincoln, 1982) and experiential learning (Nordstrom and Sherwood, 1984), the topics have not been systematically explored.

This article differs from previous literature as it reveals the advantages of involving students in case writing and presents the procedures and the actual steps to develop a relevant case writing assignment, one which will result in a usable case. The purpose of this research is to provide a demonstration of how graduate agribusiness students can use the experiential learning technique of case writing as an important and productive part of a research course. The discussion provides agribusiness instructors with a framework for the opportunities, procedures, and problems which might exist when integrating a case writing assignment into courses.

Section 1 relates the case writing activity to the changing profile of agribusiness education and the desirable characteristics of graduates. Section 2, gives a specific example utilized to discuss the issues of class composition and course requirements. Section 3 outlines the development of a framework and the step-by-step procedures for including students in the writing of case studies. Section 4 gives a brief summary of three case studies written by groups of graduate students. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the depth and focus of cases written by students and give a summary of the evaluation provided by students, alumni and faculty who participated in this exercise, as well as feedback from the industry "mentors." Section 5 focuses on conclusions and implications for the integration of such experiential exercises into the curriculum.

1. CASE WRITING AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TECHNIQUE

The changing profile of agribusiness education, as documented in the recent studies by the steering committee of the Agribusiness Education Development Project, indicates a specific array of characteristics desired in the world of agribusiness (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1989). A survey of agribusiness leaders across the country rated 74 desirable characteristics of agribusiness graduates in six broad categories. These professional categories included interpersonal skills; communication skills; business and economic skills; technical skills; computer, quantitative, and management information skills; and previous work experience in order from highest to lowest in overall ranking of importance (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1989).

The core competencies developed during the case writing exercise are consistent with almost all of these characteristics, especially those receiving the highest rankings. For example, “work under varied conditions,” “work with others; team player,” “self-confidence,” and “work without supervision” are all listed under the broad category heading “interpersonal skills,” which received the highest ranking. Each of these attributes is stressed in the various stages of case writing in the agribusiness research course. Communications skills, listed as the second highest

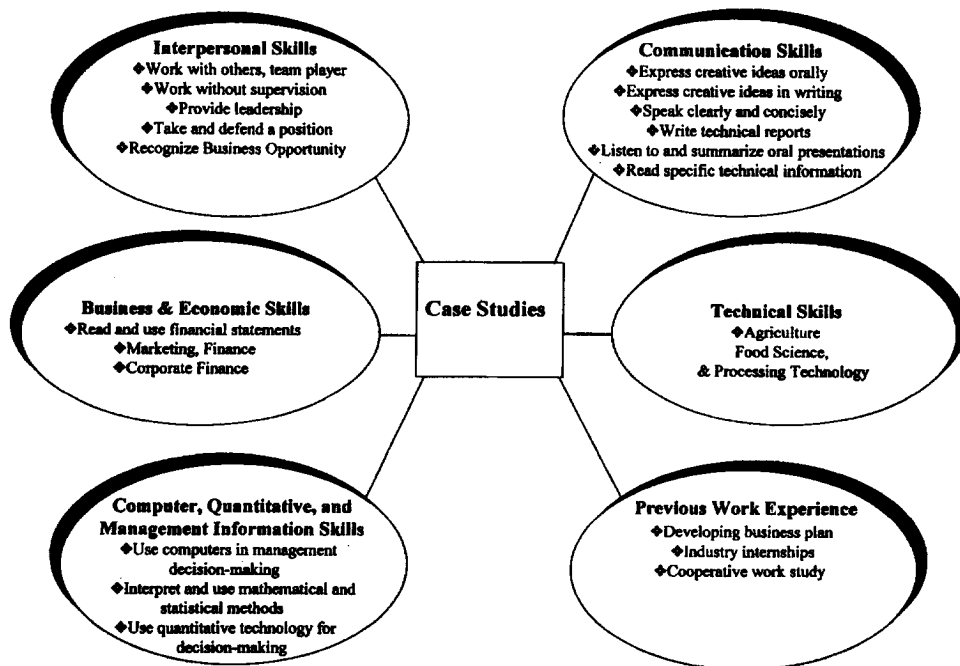


Figure 1. Contribution of Case Writing to Desirable Professional Characteristics

broad skills category, includes “listen and carry out instructions,” “express creative ideas orally/in writing,” and “speak clearly and concisely/technical information,” all of which are emphasized in the case writing activity. Other skills identified by agribusiness leaders across the country and which case writing helps to develop include: “interpret and use mathematical and statistical methods,” “identification of objectives/goals,” “understand accounting concept,” “read and use financial statements,” “marketing administration,” “developing a business plan” and “use quantitative technology for decision-making” See Figure 1 for a more detailed list of the desirable characteristics that case writing helps to develop.

The advantages of using cases for teaching strategic decision making has been well documented and are routinely listed in strategic management texts (Higgins and Vincze, 1989). This form of experiential learning has been used by many business schools in teaching the process of critical thinking and strategic problem solving. Case analysis, report writing, and presentations also utilize and reinforce the core competencies outlined in the recent survey. By taking another step back from case analysis and placing students at the perspective of the decision makers the opportunities grow even greater and the lessons become more “real” for the students.

As an exercise in experiential learning, writing cases forces those involved to investigate and record the decision making situation as it was faced by the executive; to list the relevant facts, opinions, assumptions, prejudices and subjective issues involved in the decision; to check the relevant external issues; and to focus on the key issues so that everything needed to make a decision makes its way into the case. These activities require a great deal of critical thinking on the part of those involved. In addition to the gathering of data, learning first-hand the concerns, practices and perspective of the managers, and dealing with the inevitable interrelated nature of business functions, students are forced to confront the very real situation and to apply the theories (e.g., financial decision making, strategic marketing planning) they have learned in other courses.

Usually a primary issue or decision forms the focus for each case as it is developed. The case writers attempt to include the necessary information in the case, including the setting and environment in which it occurs, without pointing directly to solutions. This configuration is required to generate a true teaching case. The writers must provide the information required for a productive case analysis, without “giving away” or making the decision seem obvious. In sorting through the tremendous amount of information at hand, the students are involved in an in-depth learning experience that makes it seem very “real” for them. Similar to the dilemma of managers, students may at times find they have too much information, and become overwhelmed, or find they have too little information, and struggle to achieve the required minimal level. Like case analysis, case writing is somewhat an “art,” used creatively after becoming familiar with the general case format and necessary components (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1989). The entire process

forces students to look deeply into the issues as vicarious strategic or pragmatic decision makers, rather than from a strictly theoretical and possibly more detached perspective.

In addition, the students are required to write an instructor's note to accompany the case. Through this mechanism, students are forced to view the case from an analysis or solution perspective. Writing the teaching note provides a real focus for the case, since the appropriate courses and issues for use must be stipulated, along with suggestions for teaching the case or analyzing the data.

2. CLASS COMPOSITION AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The M.S. in Agribusiness program is housed in the School of Business. As a result of interest among the business school faculty, case writing was introduced as an assignment in a graduate level course in agribusiness research during Spring semester 1995. The assignment was repeated with minor modifications in Fall 1996. A graduate course was selected as the appropriate vehicle for this exercise because of the intensive nature of the research, and the commitment involved by all concerned. The research course is required of all students in the graduate program, taught once per week in the evening. As part of the 33 hours required for the graduate degree, the course cycles once every three semesters in the curriculum sequence. Due to the nature of the schedule, the course includes some diversity among the students, some second-year graduate students with two semesters of graduate courses including econometrics and linear programming, and new graduate students with less experience. The student mix also includes those with previous work experience and students directly from undergraduate programs. Students were previously required to write more traditional research papers which were presented at departmental seminars. The case writing project represents a richer, more involved, interactive, qualitative research method.

During the first semester (Spring 1995), there were twelve students. In Fall 1996 there were fourteen students in the course. Approximately 60% of the students were full-time students (taking 9 semester hours) on assistantships. Other students were working in industries in the local area. Few students had previous agribusiness experience (four in 1995 and one in 1996). Each class had one foreign student.

The course is designed to provide students with the basic philosophy and techniques of scientific methods in business and economic research. Specifically, some of the course objectives are: (1) to acquaint students with the foundations of research; (2) to provide students with the conceptual and practical understanding of scientific inquiry; and (3) to enhance student skills in writing research reports. The qualitative, experiential case writing assignment was integrated into the course and accounted for 20% of the total grade. Two exams (worth 40%), a mini research proposal (20%), and quizzes, homework and other assignments (20%)

Table 1. Summary of Steps for Case Writing with Students and Faculty

<i>STAGES</i>	<i>ACTIVITY</i>	<i>TIME</i>	<i>RESPONSIBILITY</i>
Pre-Staging:	Discussion with interested Faculty: Commitment to the Case Writing Project as faculty consultants or for faculty development purposes	Before the semester begins	Course Instructor
Step 1:	Recruitment of and commitments from Business Mentors to participate; written agreement to participate and provide necessary data	Before the semester begins	Instructor, Business Mentors (usually three business leaders)
Step 2:	Participating faculty members give guest lectures on case writing; students are assigned to groups; and available company information is distributed	First two weeks	Instructor & Interested Business Faculty
Step 3:	Workshop on campus: Business mentors present their problems or challenges and relevant decision points to students and interested faculty	Fourth week	Business Mentors
Step 4:	Student groups submit brief case outlines of how the cases should be organized, including potential sources and needed data	Fifth week	Students, Instructor
Step 5:	Student groups meet individually with instructor and consulting faculty to "brainstorm" the cases and discuss their progress	Sixth week	Students, Instructor, Consulting Faculty members
Step 6:	Students and some faculty make on-site visits, capture any additional information from business mentors and other sources	Seventh - eleventh week	Students, Instructor, Business Mentors, Consulting Faculty
Step 7:	Initial written drafts of the cases are due for review by the instructor and other faculty members; Drafts are corrected for logic, flow, omissions, grammar, and other errors and returned to student groups	Twelfth week	Students, Instructor, Participating Faculty
Step 8:	Revised drafts are submitted to respective business mentors for clearance and comments; Drafts are revised by students groups	Twelfth - thirteenth week	Instructor, Business Mentors, Students
Step 9:	On-Campus Workshop: Students present the cases to an audience of faculty and mentors; Business mentors make brief comments or a short presentation to wrap up; the course/cases are evaluated by those present; a small reception ends the session; Final written cases are due	Final week	Students, Business Mentors, Participating and Interested Faculty

made up the remainder of the grade. For the case writing activity, grading was divided into 25% credit for discussions and interaction with instructor and faculty, 25% allotted for business mentor's evaluation, and the final 50% credit awarded for presentation and discussion of the completed case. The final case study was presented by each group at a course seminar.

3. FRAMEWORK FOR WRITING CASE STUDIES BY STUDENTS

The development of a successful case writing experience depends on several elements. First, the identification of agribusiness leaders who are suitable candidates and who are committed to participate in a semester-long, non-paid consulting assignment is necessary. Second, the case writing assignment must be planned to meet the educational goals of the students, the intellectual aspirations of involved faculty, and the basic objectives of the business mentors. Next, sustained improvement in the assignment involves continuous monitoring, evaluation and flexibility. Finally, the semester-long assignment has to be brought to a successful closure at semester's end. See Table 1 for a summary of the steps in the case writing process.

3.1. Recruiting Business Mentors

3.1.1 Selection of Business Mentors

The first step in the research case writing assignment was selecting suitable business leaders in relevant industries who are willing to serve as mentors for the student groups. Prior to the beginning of the semester, three agribusiness firm leaders were identified by the course instructor. These "business mentors" were recruited to assist the faculty in the training of students in the research, analysis, and writing of real-life business situations experienced by the individuals.

The mentors should be in fairly responsible positions within their firms in order to share their decision making experiences and supporting information. At the same time, mentors should be able to spend an average of 15 hours during the semester consulting with and guiding the students with their cases. Middle level management may require prior approval and clearance from their supervisors.

Unless contacted to allow a long lead time, business leaders of large corporations are sometimes reluctant to participate. The lead time is required so that corporate approval can be acquired. In the local program, university alumni have generally been willing to participate in new approaches in the classes. Also, small entrepreneurs have been more willing to participate than CEO's of large corporation. On balance, for ease of publication and access to the necessary data, a mid- to large size, publicly held corporation makes the best candidate for participation.

It is usually necessary to agree, and inform the business leaders, that the case studies will not be disseminated without prior approval from the company. During the course of the exercise it became evident that the expectations of small entrepreneurs are often very different from producing a comprehensive case study. An additional caveat is that sole proprietors are sometimes reluctant to release financial and other data, for fear of revealing their strategies or attractive situations to their competitors. It should be made clear to all of the participants that the project is not a free consulting service provided by the school, although some positive outcomes should result.

3.1.2. Responsibilities

In a classroom workshop during the fourth week of the semester, each business mentor presented a unique problem or decision point. In this first face-to-face session, the business mentors presented information concerning their respective companies' objectives and any aspects they felt represented challenges, problems, or relevant decision points. Also invited to the first presentation session were selected School of Business faculty members who were familiar with cases writing and who agreed to work with the student teams in the development of their respective case studies. At the initial workshop, each of the three business mentors was allocated approximately 30 minutes to make a presentation about themselves, the company, the selected business problems, and to respond to specific questions from the students and faculty.

The specific responsibilities and program arrangements were confirmed in writing before the beginning of the semester. The responsibilities of the business mentors included: participation at two workshops, providing the necessary relevant information for writing the case studies, evaluating the student participation, demonstrating interest in student development, and obtaining the necessary written clearance for participation from the authorized representative of the firm. To encourage participation, the business mentors were informed that the names of the companies and some confidential or proprietary information could be changed or disguised as long as the information required for the analysis and discussion were not totally distorted (e.g., scaling of financial data). Over the period of the course only one single proprietorship requested that some information be withheld and disguised.

Many business leaders who have not been exposed to the case method of instruction found it difficult to identify a relevant decision to be shared with others in an educational institution. These mentors were assisted by providing short published case studies as examples. Often when business mentors were provided the necessary information at the time of recruitment, they were happy to provide a service to the school, to share their experiences with the students, and to assist in educating the future generation. In the long run a participating company benefits from developing a relationship with the school and faculty, and in turn, enhances the firm's pool of potential qualified applicants.

3.2. Institutional Organization

3.2.1. Students

In each course the students were assigned into three groups; and the limited available information on the selected firms was provided to the students. Members of the student groups had the responsibility for any additional research and the preparation for the initial workshop. Even with the availability of the relevant information, students are required to plan and organize the material into a logical

and usable case study. With such a project, the effort of a team of students is required to seek information, summarize ideas, and pull the material together into a viable case. The project requires students to learn to work in a team with others, to overcome internal conflicts, to work without direct supervision, and to recognize a business situation, as well as to plan, organize and write the case study. In addition to those previously mentioned, benefits for the students participating in the case writing assignment included: obtaining real life experience; investigating a topic for a potential thesis or technical paper; and developing relationships that could lead to future summer internships or employment at graduation. In general these skills and competencies translate into characteristics that are very desirable to prospective employers and for career advancement.

Students were allowed to select their own groups as long as each group satisfied the following criteria: (1) had an adequate mix of full time and part time, and second and first year graduate students; (2) the selected case study had some relevance for their research or careers; and (3) the instructor reserved the right to intervene in any problems that the group members could not solve among themselves. Following group selection, the students chose their own team leaders. Team leaders were responsible for organizing meetings, assigning responsibilities, and monitoring the contribution of each member. Groups were self-evaluated twice by members to determine the contribution of each member. The instructor intervened in only one group project.

Following the mentor presentations, students made the necessary appointments for visiting with the business mentors' firms and obtaining additional information through observation and interviews. The first written drafts of the case studies were due for review at the twelfth week of the semester. The drafts were read by the instructor and the consulting faculty, corrected for accuracy, logical flow of material, omissions of important components, and any other serious errors before being submitted to the respective business mentors for their clearance. During the final week of the semester the case studies were presented at a special on-campus workshop entitled, "Agribusiness Case Studies in South Carolina." Participants included instructors and students in the School of Business and the business mentors. Students presented the cases they had written. The business mentors made comments, answered any additional questions, and sometimes provided information concerning the way in which they had resolved the original problem.

3.2.2. Faculty

The faculty members advising student teams in case writing projects need to possess expertise relative to the nature of the real life business problems being discussed. For example, a finance instructor was assigned to the group working on the decision to open a new distribution center (i.e., capital budgeting decision). More importantly, all faculty involved had worked together in the past in committee and research assignments. These factors created a strong bond of cohesiveness and

enthusiasm among faculty and students exploring this new approach to provide real life learning experiences. During the first two weeks of the semester, faculty members experienced in case writing provided guest lectures on case writing.

After the initial mentor presentations, faculty members from the various disciplines were matched with the issues in the respective cases and met with students to assist in organizing the projects. At week five the student groups were required to submit a brief outline of the cases, including any new information that might be required and the potential sources.

During the sixth week of the semester, the groups met with their course instructor and the assigned faculty member to “brainstorm” the cases and discuss their progress. In some cases, faculty members visited the firms with the students. During the course of the semester, students met frequently with the instructors, and with their business mentors as needed, usually three times.

The first time the case writing assignment was used (Spring 1995), instructors were expected to contribute approximately 10 hours of their time outside class hours. The second time this assignment was used (Fall 1996), the faculty and students had a better comprehension of the intensity of work, and the additional number of hours, expected to complete the assignment. Most of the participating faculty expressed an appreciation of the learning experience for themselves and

Table 2. Summary of Experience—A Framework for Successfully Integrating Case Writing

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Business Mentors</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Students</i>
Selection criteria	need adequate notice middle level managers Alumni locally accessible not sole proprietors	team teaching relevant & diverse disciplines cohesive unit	diversified teams
Responsibilities	willingness to teach share experience provide access to firm obtain clearance	provide guidance	work in teams conduct research write report make presentations
Benefits	develops relationship with educational institution helps locate prospective employees provides a process to generate new ideas	contact with business leaders student contact intellectual enrichment	real life decision making experience provides experience of working in teams enhances written and oral communication skills develops analytical skills
Cost	15-20 hours of time	10-15 hours of time	more intensive and realistic than research papers
Evaluation	required for continuous improvement contributes to program development provides a closure	required for continuous improvement required for student grades provides a closure	required for student grades, particularly for team projects required for continuous improvement provides a closure

Table 3. Summary of case studies written by students

<i>Case Study</i>	<i>Concepts Covered</i>	<i>Faculty Expertise</i>	<i>Suggested for use in courses</i>
Finding a market for catfish ^{a,b}	market channels costs management	marketing agribusiness economics	marketing strategy business policy
Ethical issue and labor relations in food processing and transportation firm	ethics business law transportation	Business law management agribusiness	ethics management strategy
Strategic management in a diversified financial firm ^a	strategic planning resource allocation	management finance agribusiness	management strategy
Challenge of niche marketing in the agricultural credit market ^c	agricultural marketing policy/history loan approval process	finance agribusiness marketing	finance management strategy
Enhancing the market for a franchised food restaurant	competition marketing food service	marketing agribusiness	marketing strategy
Feasibility of building a distribution center for a food processing firm ^c	discounted cash flow analysis strategic management	finance agribusiness marketing	finance strategy

Notes: a. Presented at the annual meetings of the South East Case Research Association, Charleston, SC, 1996.

b. Revised case study has been accepted for publication in the Review of Agricultural Economics, Spring 1998.

c. Presented at the annual meetings of the South East Case Research Association, Charleston, SC, 1998.

the students. Some faculty worked in the project during the second cycle as well as the first. As feedback for future direction, the course and cases were evaluated via a questionnaire administered to those attending the final workshop. The framework for developing a successful case writing assignment is summarized in Table 2.

4. EXAMPLES OF CASE STUDIES

Three case studies were written each semester. The topics were: (1) finding a market channel for farm raised catfish;¹ (2) ethical issues and labor relations in a food processing and transportation firm; (3) time management in a diversified financial services firm; (4) challenge of leadership in the agricultural credit market; (5) enhancing the market for a franchised restaurant; (6) viability of building a distribution center by a food processing firm. More details about the cases are provided in Table 3. A brief description of three case studies is provided below as an indication of the depth and focus of the assignment.

4.1. CASE #1: Finding a Market Channel for Farm Raised Catfish

This case summarized the marketing channels issues faced by the sole proprietor of Fresh Catfish Farms in rural South Carolina. The company was formed in

1985 as one of the two catfish processing plants in the state of South Carolina to ensure the consistent and timely processing of catfish grown in family-owned ponds. In 1994, the processing facility declared bankruptcy due to an unavailability of adequate amounts of fish and poor management decisions made by hired plant management. Subsequently, a new company was formed solely to manage the 90 water acres used for raising catfish and the plant was closed. In 1995, the owner reached a critical decision point with 300,000 pounds of catfish in need of a market. The delay in finding a market increased his feed cost, causing cash flow problems and decreasing the fish survival rate.

The case presented by the student team consisted of the following components: (1) an in-depth analysis of the catfish industry and markets in South Carolina and the nation; (2) the owner's business philosophy, training and initial years with the processing plant; (3) and a presentation of the alternatives providing required financial information (e.g., cash flow budgets of farming, processing, fixed and variable cost, etc); and (4) analysis and discussion of the case study. The case was used in senior undergraduate courses to teach marketing channels decision making and agribusiness policy and has been accepted for publication in an agribusiness journal.

4.2. CASE #2: Viability of Building a Distribution Center by a Food Processing Firm

A recent university graduate and senior sales manager of the Food Processing Firm was asked to evaluate the financial feasibility of establishing a Distribution Center for her firm. The decision centered on whether to building their own center or to continue to contract the required storage space.

Food Processing Firm, among the top 300 industrial firms in the United States, was involved in food processing and manufactured feed, seed, fertilizer, chemicals, animal health products and farm supplies. This agribusiness had facilities in twelve states and a growing international market. In 1995, the Food Processing Firm stored all its product output at private refrigerated warehouses at a tremendous cost. Building a distribution center would permit the firm to maintain more control, possibly save money in storage fees, and become more self-sufficient with regard to this channel function. The final decision rested heavily on the financial feasibility study.

After a visit to the processing facility, the students developed the case and provided data to consider two primary alternatives: (1) continuing to utilize private refrigerated firms through contractual agreements, or (2) building and staffing their own distribution center. For the financial analysis students estimated various payback periods, net present values, internal rates of return, modified internal rates of return, and the benefit-cost ratios. The students also presented sensitivity tests by varying costs and interest rates. The case is appropriate for senior or graduate level courses teaching financial decision making, strategic decision making, and make-versus-buy decisions. This case is under review for publication.

4.3. CASE #3: The Challenge of Niche Marketing Leadership in Agricultural Credit Markets

XYZ Corporation has been the largest agricultural lender since it was founded. Supported and protected by government regulations, the corporation established a unique reputation for service to farmers. Although legislation establishing the Corporation prohibits it from providing banking services for non-agricultural purposes, additional non-banking services (e.g., insurance) are offered to farmers. Gross farm sector income increased from \$28 billion in 1950 to \$185 billion in 1990, making it a very attractive market. The agricultural sector has had strong growth in the recent years. With the withdrawal of government-sanctioned monopoly status from the corporation, many commercial banks expressed an interest in entering the attractive agricultural credit markets. Commercial lending institutions were interested in a share of this lucrative market during its growth years.

The case describes the history of agricultural financing, the loan approval process, and the services provided by the corporation, and the imminent interest of a commercial lending institution. The case focused on maintaining and prospecting for customers and servicing the needs of agricultural customers. The case is appropriate for courses in agricultural marketing and selling to teach segmentation, customer service, profiling prospects and market selection. The case was presented at the Southeast Case Research Association conference and is being submitted for publication.

4.4. Evaluation

For the case assignment, student grades were awarded based on evaluation by the participating business mentors, the faculty consultants, and the course instructor. Actual grading was based the following criteria: the initial case outline; the final written case study and accompanying teaching notes (to assist in instruction); use of analytical skills; preparation evident at the first and the final workshops; the formal presentation; and the use of technology and agribusiness skills. Students were also requested to evaluate their colleagues on analytical skills, preparation, presentation and use of technology. Interestingly, there was little difference between faculty evaluation and student evaluation of peers.

4.4.1. Assignment Evaluation

All the students agreed (4%) or strongly agreed (96%) that this approach should be continued in this class in the future. Students' perceived advantages of writing a case study instead of a research paper included:

1. Allows students to place themselves in a manager's shoes in a "real world" environment;
2. Provides experience of personally interviewing and (in one case) seeing the food processing facility; and
3. Develops initiative and the ability to think like a manager.

The students were also very positive about the group assignment and the help provided by faculty and business mentors. According to the students, the team project provided opportunities to work together, communicate and understand colleagues better, obtain a more comprehensive view of the business decision and develop relationships with faculty and business mentors.

As a result of this assignment, one student completed a thesis on a closely related topic and has decided to continue toward a higher degree. Also, two case studies were presented by faculty-student teams at professional meetings. The evaluation, final workshop, professional presentations and a social gathering helped to bring a closure to a semester long assignment.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The benefits of the case writing experience are significantly different from case analysis and discussion. This paper demonstrates how a graduate level course was used to provide students with a business research and communication experience through a case writing assignment. It is hoped that this article provides some insights regarding how the case writing process can be integrated into classes. Some of the issues discussed here may transfer more easily to some classes than others. For example, it is easier to incorporate case writing into courses in research methodology, business policy, or strategy than into theory-based courses.

Developing a new assignment and experiential-based course delivery method such as this one is a logical step in the ongoing continuous improvement process. The limited evaluation indicated that benefits were perceived by all participants in the endeavor. The primary cost to the educational institution is the significant amount of faculty time and effort required to have a quality experience. However, it is important to remember that the long term benefits from providing experiential learning to students comes not only from those that identified by the evaluators, but also in the future competition for quality students and successful job placement of program graduates.

NOTE

1. No real names of persons or firms are used as we are in the process of obtaining the necessary clearance to publish the full text of some of these case studies. Numbers, dates and other information are also changed. However, the depth and focus of the studies have not been altered.

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