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Interdisciplinary Learning in an EMBA: Making it Happen

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The Executive MBA (EMBA) market, once a niche market served by the most elite schools, has become highly competitive. This competition is being driven by an increase in the number of B-schools offering an EMBA, corporations reducing their level of support for employees interested in an EMBA, and changes in the work histories and occupations of EMBA applicants. With the increased competition, EMBA programs have had to actively market and sell their programs to corporations and prospective students. Most B-schools have chosen one of three approaches: [1] promote the B-School brand while offering essentially the same curriculum to MBAs and EMBAs. [2] offer a low-cost, time-efficient program, or [3] offer a program quite distinct from the MBA that employers and students believe to be more relevant to their needs.

Villanova University entered the EMBA market in 2000 with a class of 23 students. Competing in the Northeast corridor against Wharton, Columbia, and NYU (and eight others) raised doubts as to the viability of a "sell the brand" strategy. As the business school dean likes to say, "We entered the market 15 years late – which provides the opportunity to be 15 years ahead in curriculum design."

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By designing an EMBA that reflects changes in the business environment (more digital, more global, frequent corporate consolidations, less predictable career paths) and the new AACSB accreditation approach (mission driven, annual progress reports), an innovative program could be offered that provides a valued, differentiated product. After a thorough review of the regional EMBA offerings and extensive conversations with the corporations supporting EMBAs in the region, it was determined that the most significant gaps in executive learning were the following:

- Solving complex, cross-functional problems.
- Making and implementing judgmental decisions involving multiple, diverse stakeholders.
- Visioning, communicating, influencing, and negotiating.
- Leveraging technology and e-commerce to meet business objectives.

Villanova University set out to design an EMBA that addressed these gaps. In order to ensure that what was promised was delivered, the concept of a Curriculum Integration Leader (CIL) was introduced. The CIL worked with the faculty in curriculum design, delivery, and the evaluation of students. The result is a program that integrates business functions and technology across geographic and national boundaries with a strong emphasis on skill development and application of what is learned in the program, during the program. We describe the philosophy underlying the design and administration of the EMBA, the benefits associated with an interdisciplinary approach to learning, and the key roles and responsibilities of CILs.

Possible Models for an EMBA

There are many choices that one makes in conceptualizing and designing a new EMBA. One option is to model the program along traditional MBA lines (a set of discrete courses that collectively yield an MBA), with some accommodation for daylong classes and/or a weekend residency. Some structural and administrative adjustments are made, while retaining the traditional MBA approach of offering a sequence of required and elective courses. This has a number of advantages with which most B-school faculty and administrators are familiar. Most obvious is the fact that faculty members do not have to alter their courses or delivery, and administrators can communicate and defend the EMBA as "it is the same as our MBA." The result is that students graduate with an MBA as good as a traditional MBA – or maybe not, since the time available for study is less than it would be for a full-time MBA, and the availability of electives is likely to be low.

A second choice is to model the EMBA program after Executive Education and training programs. This approach tends to emphasize practical, "hands-on" learning. While students often feel more engaged with this approach and report high levels of learning, cynics argue that what is really going on is "edutainment." Executive Education and corporate training programs are sometimes viewed as rewards and a useful break from the work setting. The training is often held at plush off-site facilities with many non-classroom amenities. EMBA programs that adopt this model find that many students view it in the same light as their corporate training – homework and testing are resisted. The faculty are often willing to accommodate student expectations, since faculty evaluations often rely on participant feedback.

A third model is a merging of the first two. That is, a traditional course and classroom approach with some elements of corporate training, including off-site facilities and residency periods. The administrative objective is to provide a compact traditional MBA with enough of a corporate education feel to satisfy the participants (i.e., it feels different than the students' undergraduate experience). There are many variants of this model as it has been adopted and adapted by many of the EMBA programs offered. The program may be more like one option or the other, depending on the collective approach of the faculty members teaching in the program.

A New EMBA Model: Systemic Thinking and Doing

The aspiration and vision for the Villanova EMBA was to go beyond these three models to provide a qualitatively different program. The vision aims for a high level of mastery of knowledge and skills, emphasizing the integrative, cross-functional nature of the business activities performed by the EMBA student. The integrating theme is that: Business organizations are complex social and goal-oriented systems, where every action has multiple and time-lagged consequences – not just the consequences intended. To design a program around this vision and theme, the EMBA must capitalize on the attributes of the executive learner and the innovation potential that the executive setting, facilities, and session pacing offer. It must also leverage the curricular freedom permitted by AACSB so as to produce learners that reflect the B-school's mission. (Villanova's is to develop adaptive problem solvers.) Finally, it requires a core group of faculty members to let go of some tightly held ideas associated with their functional training, to innovate in order to pursue the vision and theme, and, importantly, to work closely with a hands-on Curriculum Integration Leader.

Different Learners

The vision to develop adaptive problem solvers at an executive level is shaped by the attributes of the learner. Participants are actively recruited from companies through the personal efforts of the Dean and EMBA Program Office. For the most part, the employer provides the tuition and some time away from the office (e.g., every other Friday) for a high-potential employee to attend the program. This commitment helps to ensure that entering students are truly talented and valued by their organizations.

Executive MBA participants tend to be different from other MBA students. They are older and more experienced, and many already have an advanced degree. They are working while attending the program, and many are in positions of significant responsibility. They often have greater depth of knowledge than their faculty in an industry or function or both. Many have attended interesting and engaging corporate training programs. These attributes of the learner provide a number of challenges – foremost is the fact that learners are a “demanding” population who want their expectations for an efficient, relevant curriculum to be met with a service environment that parallels their corporate experience.

More exciting, however, is the opportunity these learners provide for a creatively designed EMBA program. They have business experience, are challenged in their jobs, and expect the challenges to increase all the time. This is especially true since their organizations, through sponsorship, have publicly identified them as high potential. Their daily experiences teach them the systems nature of resolving issues and taking actions. More and more they are forced to make decisions that have no singular right answer for the many stakeholders affected – whose consequences are not immediately apparent, yet may be far-reaching. A program providing specific, functional yet isolated fragments of knowledge does not fit their needs or desires. They know they need to be adaptive problem solvers to be effective in an uncertain and rapidly changing business environment. For them, learning is invariably ‘just in time’.”

Different Setting and Pacing

If the mindset of the learner is conducive to non-traditional education, so is the EMBA setting and pacing. Delivery is typically on Fridays or Saturdays or both, with some residency periods – most of which are full days of learning with the opportunity for community meals and study group work outside of the class meeting times. Villanova's EMBA is an alternating Friday plus Saturday in residency model with two seven-day residency periods over a 21-month duration.

The all-day and weekend approach can be shaped to reinforce the cross-functional nature of business (curriculum design which breaks from traditional functionally oriented courses) and the nature of the learner (experienced, likely to have functional expertise, confronting complex issues daily). In contrast to the MBA, cohort classes of modest size (20-50) can be formed along with study groups of five or six participants – either or both of which can be permanent, or changed to support the pedagogy.

In the case of Villanova, a recently purchased and renovated executive conference center provides the housing, dining, classrooms, and infrastructure (with wired, wireless, and on-line capabilities) to support innovative approaches with different cohort and study groups. In spite of the opportunity provided by most EMBA settings and pacing, implementation is often the routine delivery of standard courses using textbooks designed for 30 to 45 sessions delivered over a 15-week semester. A program-wide commitment to innovation from the administration, a committed faculty, and structural mechanisms, such as Curriculum Integration Leaders, are essential to create and deliver an integrative, cross-functional, systems-oriented EMBA.

Challenges of Integration

EMBA programs persist in using traditional, functional approaches to courses for three important reasons:

- Faculty member resistance to change (or, more positively, "I've done this for 10 to 20 years and am at the top of my game").
- Students' ignorance of alternative pedagogical approaches.
- An existing curriculum nested in textbooks, publishers, and research agendas.

Many faculty members are resistant to change what or how they teach. They are products of a functional discipline approach. Indeed, as they advanced in their studies and profession, they became more specialized. The evaluation and reward system for academics reinforces a functional specialist orientation. These systems emphasize publication productivity linked to a stream of research. With good reason, faculty members believe the most effective path to publication is to focus, become a recognized expert, and teach in areas of their research. An efficient way to teach is to master certain cases and theories, develop quality presentations around these, and then deliver, deliver, deliver. If one must teach more broadly than one’s area of research or education or both, personal efficiency suggests limiting this breadth, and then not changing too much.

Students unwittingly reinforce the specialized approach. Although they plea for relevance and real-world applicability, they also want little ambiguity in classroom pedagogy. They ask for deliverables to be spelled out in detail and have a low tolerance for grading ambiguity. They punish faculty members who do not meet these expectations through faculty and course evaluations – among the few visible measures of faculty classroom performance to the administration. Since teaching that reflects a depth of knowledge in a functional discipline is interpreted by students as "rigor," "challenge," and "learning," faculty willingly accommodate. Dealing with messy business issues as they exist is seen in the opposite light – soft, with the professor only able to exercise judgment and often viewed as lacking focus. After all, if there is no right answer, how much challenge and rigor can there be?

Thirdly, the curricular structure of higher education reinforces (some argue demands) a functional approach. Many B-schools have interpreted accrediting agency guidelines (i.e., AACSB and regional accreditation bodies) as most clearly and easily satisfied through the delivery of functional courses by functionally trained professors. Textbooks tout satisfying the latest AACSB guidelines. Publishers provide the teaching notes, PowerPoint presentations, test questions, and more. The unambiguous message is: "Stick to the textbook and you can't go wrong." In addition, traditional course delivery allows for rigorous, if not relevant, grading criteria – criteria that students have internalized since entering high school. In order to overcome these challenges, administrators and faculty members must be won over by the case for integration.

Why Integration Over Functional?

Decades of tradition have produced a comfort level on the part of administrators (mostly ex-faculty members), faculty, and students with a functional approach. Increasingly, the forces for an integrated cross-functional approach to learning are gaining momentum. These forces are most powerful for EMBA programs.

The key stakeholders, participants and their employers, are increasingly requiring an integrated understanding of business to gain and sustain advantage in the market place. No matter how comfortable someone is with the functional approach in educational settings, they know this approach is less relevant to the problems they face in their careers. Experience has taught these adult learners that business problems are complex and messy, and that their business solutions have unforeseen and time-lagged consequences. Problems and solutions do not fit neatly within functional boundaries. EMBA students have learned this lesson through personal and work experience. As they advance, the importance of learning from the lesson is more and more obvious. Many of these learners are functional experts in a variety of disciplines – and very good ones at that. But more and more, the problems they face go beyond functional boundaries. In spite of their comfort level with a function, they desire to become systemic thinkers through the EMBA program. Indeed, for many the most important educational objective is to learn processes, not facts, to deal with complex boundary-spanning problems.

Similarly, employers are becoming less tolerant of programs perceived as rigorous but without practical, immediate relevance. The employees they fund for EMBA programs are quite likely their future corporate leaders. They know these future leaders are well beyond the point of only having to handle neatly packaged problems. The competitive pressures they face reduce employer tolerance for sponsoring high-potential employees in programs that do not reflect their reality.

EMBA Mission

To educate the business leaders of a not-too-distant tomorrow, how should the EMBA be conceived and operationalized? At Villanova, the goal has been to develop and deliver a program based on a "business mastery wheel" (see Figure 1). At the core are the students who are to learn how to become adaptive problem solvers, guided by faculty. The significance of students at the core might seem obvious, but when taken seriously, the implication is profound. Faculty must be willing to guide and mentor in terms of student needs for an integrated program, not in terms of the faculty member's current research agenda or last year's syllabus. Likewise, the schedule of topics, timing of student assessment (e.g., tests), etc., must be driven by learning objectives, not faculty convenience.

The curriculum must be thoroughly integrated and cross-functional, the specifics of which are discussed below. Topics need to be woven into the curriculum that cut across functions and skill development areas: technology, ethics, social responsibility, communication, a global perspective, negotiations, team building, leadership, and learning from experiential activities. How well the EMBA prepares business leaders for cross-functional and system-wide challenges will determine the extent to which the various stakeholders are satisfied: students, business sponsors, faculty, staff, the university, accreditation bodies, alumni, advisory groups, and society at large. This is a grand vision with clear operational challenges. We now turn our attention to the specifics of Villanova's attempt to implement this vision in an EMBA program.

Villanova's Five-Module Approach to the EMBA

The Villanova EMBA is a 21-month program organized into five 16-week modules, with each module meeting every other Friday and Saturday with a required overnight residency each time the program meets. There is an average of 15 classroom hours per weekend, 120 classroom hours per module. In addition to the modules, there are two seven-day residencies. The first week includes acculturation activities designed to immerse students in the integrative model of the program and to gain student buy-in. The second week consist of an international business trip for the EMBA cohort – the first trip was to China.

To reinforce an integrative perspective, modules are organized according to themes. A Curriculum Integration Leader (CIL) is responsible for seeing that each module theme is woven throughout the module and integrated with the rest of the program. Before briefly describing the five themes, it is important to note a paradigm shift in the delivery of the modules. First, topics within themes are organized hour-by-hour, not course-by-course. The CIL is responsible for working with other faculty members to ensure that the topics are integrated as seamlessly as possible and fit appropriately. For example, economics would not be discussed apart from accounting frameworks and customer relations.

Second, each theme is process-centered not content-centered. Although students learn specific content, the focus is on adaptive problem solving. That is, when faced with a business issue, what is a relevant problem solving approach, how might that approach be operationalized, and what immediate and long-run consequences might the approach have for (1) problem resolution, (2) other parts of the business, and (3) different stakeholder interests. Finally, the paradigm is learner-centered rather than instructor-centered. As the Academic Vice-President at Villanova puts it, the model changes the paradigm from "the sage on the stage" to "the guide on the side."

The Module I theme is entitled Integrating Business Processes. It includes principles and applications of systemic thinking, economics, customer and stakeholder relationship management, accounting frameworks, and principles of electronic business. The Module II theme is entitled Effective Decision-Making Tools and includes applied business statistics, financial analysis and management, project management, and decision technology. The Module III theme is Managing Human Capital and Leadership. It includes leadership, negotiation, communication, ethics, corporate transformations, and managing human resources. Module IV is entitled Value-Based Management and includes multiple valuation approaches: performance and metrics, corporate risk management, market-driven strategies for value creation, and electronic business and the value chain. The Module V theme is Strategy in a Changing Environment and includes strategic planning, competitive analysis, learning organizations, corporate restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, and electives on emerging business issues (topics chosen in consultation with the students). In both Modules IV and V, students work on a second-year Systems Application Project. In order to provide a better sense of the modules, we will briefly describe the delivery of Module III, as shown in Figure 2. We chose Module III since its delivery was recently completed and one of the co-authors is the CIL for the module.

At first glance, it appears that Module 3 has "courses" in Communication, Systems, Negotiations, Leadership, HR, and Ethics. Each topic is covered in connection to the others based on the specific material being covered that session by the faculty member. What Figure 2 implies, but does not directly say, is the following.

1. Communication is taught and evaluated throughout the Module. The opening session sets the stage; the following two Communication sessions involve an entire day to provide both concept and practice opportunities. The next Communication sessions are pre and post the Leadership Simulation – a two-day experience of leading a fictitious company called Foodcorp (more on this below). Student presentations on an E-Business consulting engagement (for Foodcorp) provide "test data" for the Communication portion of the Module. Note that Communication content material is in only three of the eight weekend sessions.

2. A Systems session is conducted each weekend the group meets, and on some occasions, on both meeting days. While Systems comes closest to a traditional course in terms of its pacing, it regularly links to the Leadership and Negotiations sessions and is always delivered as an interdisciplinary, global topic.

3. The Negotiations sessions are a blend of negotiation skills training, employment law, and conflict management. Most of the content and skill building aspects are

conducted before the Leadership Simulation, and observed in the simulation.

4. Select Ethics topics and principles are introduced "just-in-time" to highlight the importance of values, to attend to diverse stakeholder issues, to ensure a healthy respect for diversity, and to demonstrate how ethics, legal rights and obligations, and leadership are intertwined.

5. Leadership (and organizational behavior) is explored throughout Module III – through self-assessment instruments, video case discussion, role-plays, the *Foodcorp* simulation, and the E-Business consulting engagement with *Foodcorp*.

6. Senior executives from the sponsoring companies (President, CIO, COO levels) provide their insights on select topics to reinforce the importance and practicality of the materials covered.

7. *Foodcorp*, *International* provides a practice opportunity to use the ideas and skills discussed throughout the Module. *Foodcorp* is a behavioral simulation (in-basket driven, role-play oriented) that involves 10 to 12 participants in the top roles of the company. Two facilitators work with each *Foodcorp* leadership team – observing the behavior of the participants, facilitating a debriefing, and orchestrating a peer feedback process on leadership, communication, negotiation, and interpersonal skills.

8. After having lead *Foodcorp*, the students are then asked to be consultants to *Foodcorp* – with the engagement being to recommend to *Foodcorp* areas of e-business and e-organization activity. This draws on knowledge previously acquired in Modules I and II, as well as on the behavioral skills addressed in Module III.

9. Module III concludes with an applied content-oriented final exam (comprehensive for the entire Module) and a team-building activity to ensure solid small-group interactions for Module IV.

Curriculum Integration Leaders

In spite of the best of intentions suggested by the above curriculum plan, experience has taught us that EMBA programs will not be well integrated unless someone takes formal responsibility for doing so. To help address this, we have established faculty Curriculum Integration Leaders within each module. The CIL role addresses a number of specific needs. First and foremost, the CILs are the standard bearers on the front line of the Villanova EMBA. They assure that the vision of integration occurs throughout the module and that the module is linked as seamlessly as possible with other modules.

To accomplish this, CILs help to recruit colleagues who share the program's vision and have the capabilities to teach in ways consistent with that vision. This means they need to avoid faculty members who have very low needs for inclusion, and very high needs for control. They organize meetings of module faculty, and set a tone of collaboration. With the module faculty, they develop the module concept, see that learning objectives and deliverables are established, build the curriculum hour-by-hour, and schedule faculty teaching hours. In the process, they must sometimes act as peacekeeper, reminding the faculty team of the vision to avoid turf wars.

Since the EMBA is concentrated in weekends, they must coordinate the pacing and balance of the student workload and ensure that graded assignments are effectively spaced. They also can coordinate "multiple grades" for the "same product" when faculty members agree to evaluate a student assignment from several perspectives. They collect and share syllabi, readings, simulations, etc. with the module faculty. In accomplishing these tasks, a skilled CIL is seen as a faculty colleague, not an administrator. The CIL teaches in the module with the other faculty. The goal is to shape module faculty into a team with a commitment to mutual success in achieving module objectives.

To facilitate integration, CILs attend all class sessions. This helps CILs guide students in making immediate linkages among sessions and to cross-reference concepts from different sessions. The CILs presence throughout the weekend also allows for considerable informal interaction with the EMBA students during breaks, meals, and Friday evening study group and social activities. At these times, the CIL has the opportunity to find out how things are going from a student perspective. For example, areas warranting additional attention or tutoring can be identified. The CIL can then act on these needs in conjunction with the other faculty and EMBA Program Office. CILs also attract and brief guest speakers to reinforce integration. In addition, CILs meet monthly with the other module CILs to seek integration across modules and the residency weeks. Finally, CILs coordinate with the EMBA Program Office to keep them informed and to link social/cohort aspects of the program, such as student meetings with business leaders.

Perhaps most importantly, the CILs are committed to viewing the EMBA as a learning organization. The Dean and EMBA Program Office enthusiastically promote this view. The mind-set is not to "get it right once and for all." Rather the vision is to offer a pedagogically sound, career enhancing educational experience – an experience that requires on-going re-examination and revision as our learning and the business environment evolves. The mantra of the CILs is: "Improve as we go to keep the curriculum current and engaging."

Suggested Approach for New CILs

For many faculty members, the opportunity to participate in the EMBA as a CIL offers an exciting challenge. The demands placed on the CIL, as discussed, can appear daunting. With that in mind, we offer a few recommendations to new CILs.

The first suggestion is to keep in mind that you truly are part of a learning organization. Take advantage of this as one of the module faculty members. You have a license to try things! The EMBA affords the opportunity to make your specialized knowledge relevant to a very demanding audience with few delivery constraints (e.g., hours, rooms, and other infrastructure considerations are flexible). Use this flexibility to adjust your traditional MBA course to fit the EMBA learner by starting where it is easier for you – pick the low hanging fruit. Use the knowledge gained in doing things that are easy for you to learn how to approach more difficult challenges.

In contrast to most other courses you teach, remember that you're not alone – the administration and other module faculty members can act as a sounding board. You have an important say in who those other faculty are! Reinforcing the norm of collaboration and mutual support is a key to an exciting and enjoyable experience – and a well-integrated module.

A third recommendation is to “seek the center of W-Cubed." We refer to W-Cubed as consisting of three questions (as shown in Figure 3):

(1) What do we want?
(2) What do they want?
(3) What can we do?

The goal of the CIL should be to hit the intersection of the three questions in their EMBA module. The “we” and “they” in these questions represent various stakeholders. Three primary stakeholders are the students, employer-sponsors, and EMBA faculty. However, other stakeholders are relevant as well – including the AACSB, the Dean, and even spouses and significant others. In the beginning to design (or re-design) an EMBA module, we recommend CILs start the process with an exploration of W-Cubed

This is a great way to open the first meeting of module faculty. We also encourage the attendance of a few students, employer-sponsors, and the EMBA Director at this meeting. By explicitly exploring the W-Cubed questions, common traps can be avoided. These include assuming we (the faculty) already know everything “they” want. Also, faculty members often assume constraints on “What we can do” that are not really present. Our experience has been that an exploration of W-Cubed helps move faculty out of the box of traditional approaches to curriculum, and toward innovative, integrative approaches to the EMBA.

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Figure 1
The Business Mastery Wheel:
The Villanova B-School Learning Environment

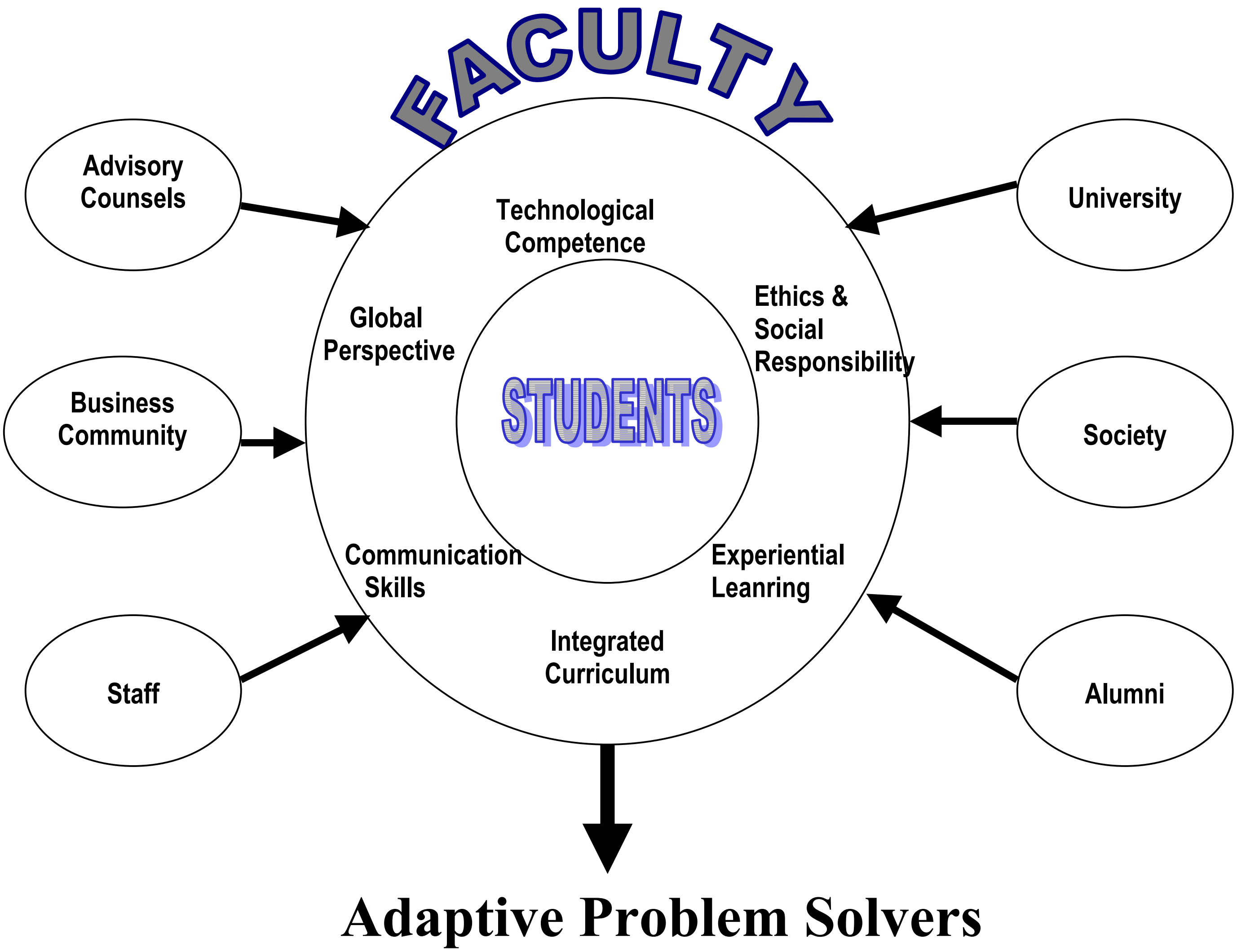

Figure 2
EMBA Module III: Managing Human Capital and Leadership

Time Slot	Friday 1	Saturday 2	Friday 3	Saturday 4	Friday 5	Saturday 6	Friday 7	Saturday 8
I (3 hr)	Communication	Leadership	Leadership	Communication	Negotiations & HR	Leadership	Ethics & HR	HR
LUNCH								
II (3 hr)	Systems	HR	Systems	Communication	Systems	Leadership	Systems	Systems
III (2 hr)	Negotiations		Negotiations		HR Guest Speaker		Negotiations	
DINNER								
IV (2 hr)	Open		HR Guest Speaker		Family Night		Open	

Time Slot	Friday 9	Saturday 10	Sunday 11	Friday 12	Saturday 13	Friday 14	Saturday 15	Friday 16	Saturday 17
I (3 hr)	Negotiations & HR	Leadership Simulation	Communication	Ethics & Communication	Negotiations	Ethics & Leadership	Leadership & HR	E-Biz Presentation	Final Exam
LUNCH									
II (3 hr)	Communication	Leadership Simulation	Systems	Systems	Systems	Systems	Systems	E-Biz Presentation	Team Building
III (2 hr)	Leadership Simulation	Leadership Simulation		Global Leadership Guest		HR Guest Speaker		Open	
DINNER									
IV (2 hr)	Leadership Simulation & Communication	Open		Global Leadership Guest		Open		Open	

Figure 3
W-Cubed