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IMMERSIVE LEARNING IN BUSINESS: BEYOND EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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Experiential learning has been enhanced and redefined, systematically formalized, and institutionalized at a large Midwestern US university as a major initiative that serves as a hallmark of the institution's immersive learning mission and strategic brand position among its peer institutions. Immersive learning pulls together interdisciplinary student teams guided by faculty to create high-impact learning experiences that result in real-world solutions for outside business partners. This paper describes this project-based immersive learning model incorporated campus-wide at Ball State University, and provides an example of a branding strategy project undertaken by a team of marketing and construction management students for a major corporation in the global construction industry.

Keywords: Marketing, Construction management, Experiential education, Immersive learning

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to traditional classroom-based learning, experiential learning has increasingly become a corner-stone pedagogy among today's educators. Among various models, Kolb and Fry (1975) offer a widely accepted four-stage theory of experiential learning suggesting that learning occurs in a cyclical fashion involving experience, observation and reflection, forming abstract causal relationships, and testing concepts in new applied situations. They define experiential learning as a process whereby knowledge is gained through the transformation of experience. Borzak (1981) further notes that experiential learning necessitates direct experience with a concept rather than merely cognitive study or discussion by the learner. Thus, active engagement by the learner is a tenant of experiential learning pedagogy. This idea has been successfully put into practice by marketing educators as evidenced by a cursory review of applied examples of experiential learning published over the past decade (Newberry and Collins, 2012; Grau and Akin, 2011; Greene, 2011; Charlebois and Gilberson, 2010; Clark and White, 2010; Cracium and Corrigan, 2010; Lilly and Pollack, 2008; Sojka and Fish, 2008; Haytko, 2006; Wooldridge, 2006; Peterson and Albertson, 2006; Elam and Spotts, 2004; Hunt and Laverie,

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2004; Helms *et al.,* 2003; Swift and Denton, 2003; Razzouk *et al.,* 2003).

IMMERSIVE VS. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

While the notion of experiential learning is not new, the concept has been taken a significant step further at a major Midwestern US university. The experiential learning philosophy has been systematically formalized and incorporated on a campus-wide basis by Ball State University as a major initiative that serves as a hallmark of the institution's *immersive learning* mission (Sanyal, 2012; Gora, 2007a 2007b). Immersive learning, Ball State's brand of experiential education, has become the thrust of its core mission and the foundation of its "Education Redefined" positioning strategy prominently featured in all marketing communications. Extending experiential learning, immersive learning pulls together interdisciplinary student teams guided by expert faculty to create unique, high-impact learning experiences that result in real-world solutions. Between 2007 and 2013, 20,830 students have completed upwards of 1259 immersive learning projects throughout Indiana, the US, and abroad. During this reporting period, 1602 undergraduate students involving multidisciplinary teams of marketing, finance, accounting, production management, and information systems majors have been involved in 156 immersive projects within the university's college of business alone.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMERSIVE LEARNING

Several specific characteristics distinguish immersive learning as an extended type of experiential learning. Immersive learning at Ball State is a project-based, formalized approach to experiential learning that must generally satisfy seven criteria (Table 1). The immersive project must carry academic credit applying toward the students' program of study and engage students in an active learning process that is self-driven but guided by a faculty mentor. The project must produce a tangible outcome, such as a marketing plan, policy recommendations, book, play, or DVD and involve a team of students working on a project that is often multidisciplinary in nature. Additionally, the project must include outside community partners and create an impact on the larger community in addition to student participants. Finally, the effort must focus on student learning outcomes and assist students in defining career

| **Table 1: Seven Characteristics of Immersive Learning Projects**	
An immersive learning project must:	
1	Carry academic credit applying toward students' academic programs of study.
2	Engage participants in an active learning process that is student-driven but guided by a faculty mentor.
3	Produce a tangible outcome or product, such as a business plan, policy recommendation, book, play, or DVD.
4	Involve at least one team of students, often working on a project that is interdisciplinary in nature.
5	Include community partners and create an impact on the larger community as well as on the student participants.
6	Focus on student learning outcomes.
7	Help students define a career path or make connections to a profession or industry.

paths or make connections to a profession or industry of student interest.

IMMERSIVE LEARNING PROJECT MODEL

Figure 1 illustrates the basic structure of an immersive learning project at the university. There are generally four layers of project participants. The primary participants include the outside client or partner and the immersive project team comprised of an interdisciplinary student group

and faculty mentor. The two remaining layers consist of a university administrative support office and a layer of resource partners, both internal and external.

The typical project generally originates through contact between an outside client and any of three university offices: the Provost, the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry, or the business outreach personnel in Building Better Communities. Project concept development, the project proposal including objectives and

Figure 1: Immersive Learning Project Model
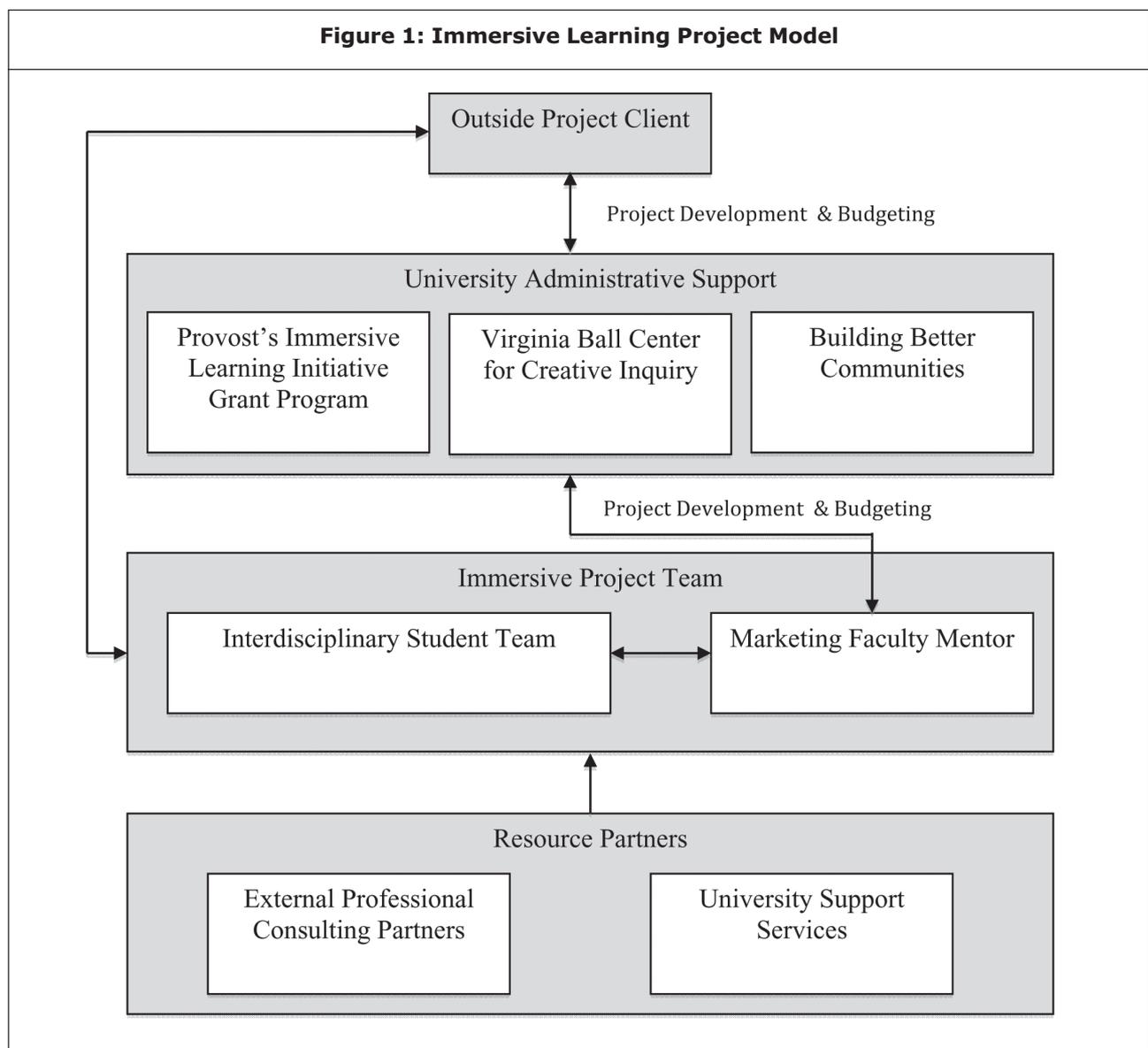
assessment issues, and budgeting involves these participants along with a lead faculty mentor recruited for the project.

In terms of budgeting, the client is typically responsible for direct project/research costs and a course release buyout for the faculty mentor. Historically, immersive learning project budgets start at approximately $4000 (characteristic for many not-for-profit clients) on upwards toward as much as six figures depending on the scope of the specific project.

The Provost's Immersive Learning Initiative Grant Program annually funds projects involving community not-for-profit organizations or internal projects of social relevance in cases where outside funding sources are unavailable. The Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry typically develops and funds major creative immersive projects spanning multiple semesters. The Building Better Communities outreach unit develops and coordinates a large number of immersive learning projects involving both commercial and not-for-profit outside clients. Thus, immersive projects are generated by three university units all under the direction of the university's director of immersive education.

Once the project and budget have been approved, the faculty mentor is responsible for recruiting the student project team, working out course credit issues specific to each student's program of study, and organizing the student team. Prior to the start of the project, student members are required to attend a one-day team-building orientation workshop. This has been a valuable exercise to assist in identifying team project leaders. Since the project typically involves continuous contact with the outside business client personnel, student team members are additionally required to attend sessions on business etiquette run by the university.

In addition to contact with the outside client and university's administrative support office, the immersive project team is supported throughout the project by two types of resource partners as shown in the model. One type of support comes internally through a variety of university services including, for instance, computing IT support, graphic design, video production, transportation and logistics, media relations, etc. A second type of support frequently involves external community partner business professionals who volunteer to lend consulting support to the project. These community partners may include marketing research, advertising, public relations, design, and other business-related industry personnel. Recruiting external community resource partners is the responsibility of the marketing faculty mentor.

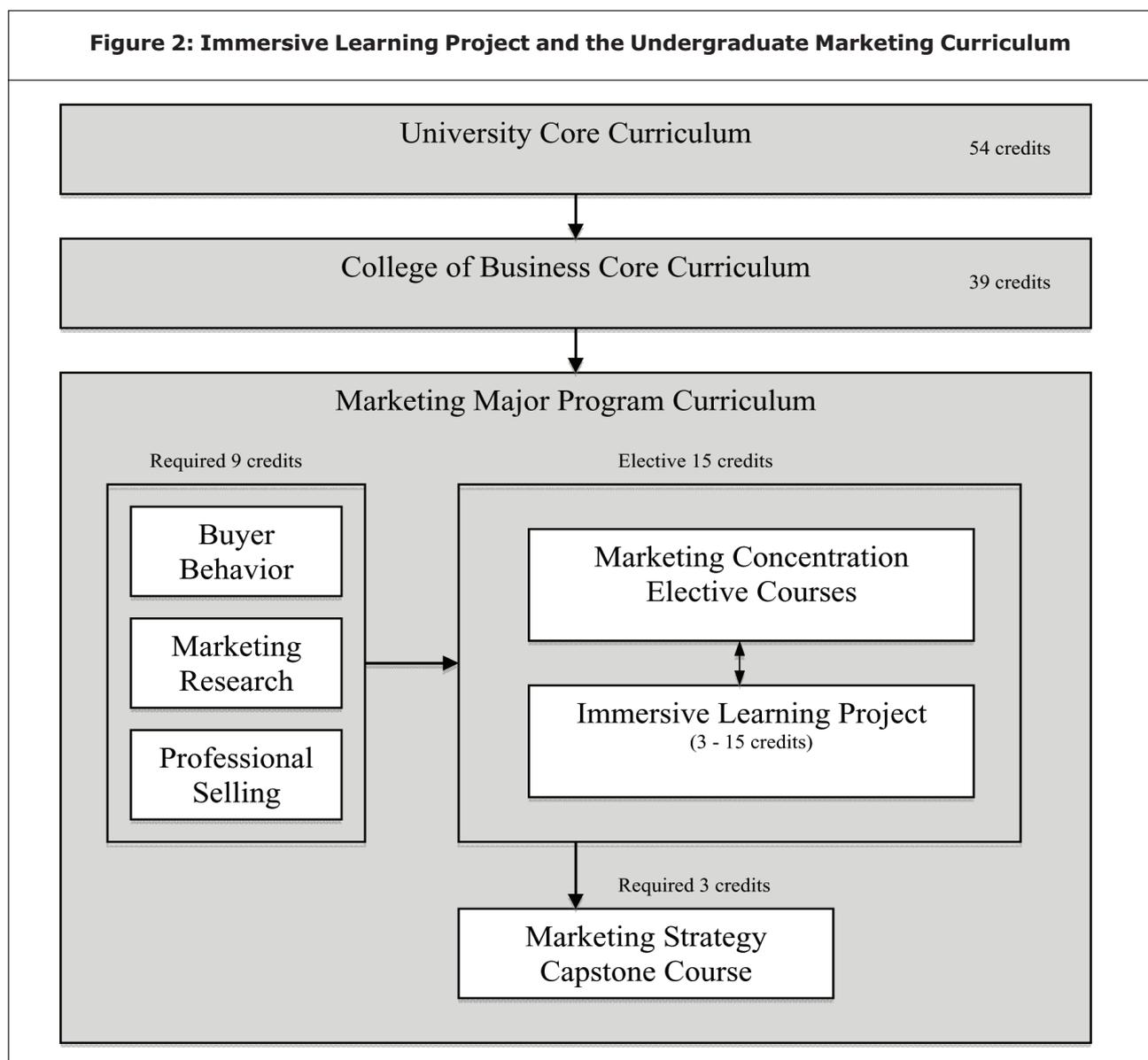## IMMERSIVE LEARNING PROJECT AND MARKETING CURRICULUM

Since the typical immersive learning project is client focused, the majority of projects undertaken at Ball State's college of business to date have, not surprisingly, focused on marketing problems facing both commercial and not-for-profit firms. A marketing student involved in a semester-long project, earns variable credit depending on the scope of the project under an assigned course number applicable to the student's major program as an elective class. Assigned immersive project credit is normally 3 h but may run as high as 15

depending on the nature, scope, duration of the project, and its fit with the student's concentration within the marketing major umbrella. While each student is responsible for satisfying his/her university, college, and marketing program core requirements (Figure 2), the immersive project option is a means for each student to gain real-world experience in a marketing-related area possibly not covered by an available course elective.

IMMERSIVE LEARNING PROJECT CHALLENGES

Based on experience to date, the two foremost challenges associated with implementing our immersive learning initiative fall in the areas of student recruiting and assessment of learning.

Student immersive learning project team recruiting is a critical issue. Since the majority of business-related immersive learning projects are

Figure 2: Immersive Learning Project and the Undergraduate Marketing Curriculum

University Core Curriculum	54 credits

College of Business Core Curriculum	39 credits

Marketing Major Program Curriculum

Required 9 credits　　　　　　　　　　Elective 15 credits

- Buyer Behavior
- Marketing Research
- Professional Selling

Marketing Concentration Elective Courses

Immersive Learning Project
(3 - 15 credits)

Required 3 credits

Marketing Strategy Capstone Course

interdisciplinary in nature, the importance of assembling a team with an appropriate mix of talents and interests cannot be overstated. Carefully identifying and specifying the skill sets needed for the project is extremely important when the call for project participants is made. Likewise, clearly communicating student workload expectations to team candidates is crucial during recruiting in that the immersive learning project typically involves a much greater time commitment than would be the case with a traditional course carrying similar credit.

Assessment of learning outcomes is a constant challenge. Since each immersive project is unique, standardized learning assessment methods are often not effective in addressing common, traditional learning objectives established for the students' specific programs. One metric found useful concerns the tracking of job connections made by student participants. Our experience is encouraging in that many students ultimately secure internships and/or permanent employment upon graduation with either project clients or outside professional resource partners involved in the project. To this end, our immersive learning program initiative appears to be successful.

Another tool involves a more generic assessment rubric for evaluating each immersive learning project after its completion. The dimensions involved in this assessment effort focus on four general factors: the students' interaction with the community partner/client, students' ability to take project ownership in addressing the problem and carrying it to successful completion, ability to function as an interdisciplinary team, and the ability of students'

to utilize the project as a means of defining and enhancing a career path (Table 2).

ILLUSTRATIVE IMMERSIVE LEARNING PROJECT IN BUSINESS

As an example of a recent immersive learning project typifying those undertaken within Ball State University's business program, a major construction management firm having a global reputation for its expertise in sports venue, hospitality, medical facility, and commercial project construction approached the university seeking assistance in reviewing and enhancing its brand management strategy. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this project, two faculty mentors were recruited as project mentors, one in marketing and one in construction management. A project budget was jointly developed and approved by the faculty mentors in consultation with the client, and an interdisciplinary team of eleven students was selected including individuals majoring in marketing, public relations, advertising, economics, business administration, and construction management. The project was organized to span two semesters, and each student was assigned three hours of elective coursework credit applicable to his/her respective academic program.

The objectives of this illustrative immersive project were to examine the client's brand position within its market segments based upon a survey of the firm's customers and business partners and assess brand image fit relative to the strategic branding position desired by client

Table 2: Rubric for the Assessment of Immersive Learning Project

Name:

Project:

<u>Directions</u>: Circle the appropriate rating for the student for each theme integral to your Immersive Learning project. Please note that all classes will have additional learning outcomes that will need to be assessed. This rubric focuses specifically on those associated with immersive learning.

1. Community Partner

Professionalism, Integrity and Ethics

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Demonstrated unprofessional behavior, lack of integrity and/ or violated ethical standards.	Demonstrated the minimal degree of professionalism necessary and committed no ethical violations.	Demonstrated a moderate degree of professionalism and/or showed integrity at times through the process.	Demonstrated a high degree of professionalism and/or integrity. Committed no ethical violations.

Understanding and Cultural Competency

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Was not able to identify the needs of the community partner or find solutions that respected/ maintained the organizational/ group culture.	Was able to identify some of the needs of the community partner and found some solutions that respected/maintained the organizational/group culture.	Was able to identify the needs of the community partner and found many solutions that respected/ maintained the organizational/ group culture.	Was able to identify the needs of the community partner and found many solutions that respected/maintained and positively impacted the organizational/group culture.

Communication

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Did not listen or communicate effectively across disciplinary lines and/or did not show engagement or respect for persons with varying points of views and ideas.	Listened and demonstrated acknowledgment of persons of varying points of view and diverse ideas by responding to ideas in relationship to own existing ideas.	Engaged in dialogue with and demonstrated acceptance of persons of varying points of view and diverse ideas by augmenting own existing ideas with new ones.	Initiated dialogue with and demonstrated support for persons with varying points of view and respect for diverse ideas by integrating those points with own existing ideas.

Other

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
–	–	–	–

2. Student Centered/Student Driven

Ownership and Contribution

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Showed limited ownership or commitment to the project. Contributed little through the process.	Showed minimal ownership or commitment to the project. Contributed as was requested.	Showed significant ownership or commitment to the project. Contributed significantly and initiated ideas and actions.	Showed significant ownership or commitment to the project. Contributed in a manner that was significantly instrumental to the success of the project.

Problem and Solution Identification

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Contributed little to the problem and solution identification process.	Contributed minimally to the problem and solution identification process.	Contributed significantly and positively to the problem and solution identification process.	Contributions were critical and instrumental to the problem and solution identification process. The absence of this member would have significantly changed the outcome of the project.

Table 2 (Cont.)

Other			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
–	–	–	–

3. Interdisciplinary/Cooperative Learning

Integrate Disciplinary Knowledge

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Contributed little of own disciplinary knowledge or expertise and was resistant to integrating knowledge from other disciplines into personal constructs.	Contributed own disciplinary knowledge or expertise to some degree and was open to integrating knowledge from other disciplines into personal constructs.	Extensively contributed own disciplinary knowledge or expertise and was effective at integrating knowledge from other disciplines into personal constructs.	Extensively contributed own disciplinary knowledge or expertise and was effective at integrating knowledge from other disciplines into personal constructs in creative and meaningful ways.

Teamwork, Leadership and Conflict Resolution

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Struggled with integrating self into team, resolving conflict, and/ or was disruptive to the success of the group.	Successfully integrated self into team and resolved most conflicts.	Successfully integrated self into team, provided leadership at times and resolved most conflicts effectively.	Successfully integrated self into team as well as provided valued leadership and resolved conflicts effectively.

Follow Through and Commitment

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Unreliability negatively impacted success of group.	Met most deadlines with the quality of work needed and supported the mission of the group.	Met all deadlines and competently facilitated the successful implementation of the mission of the group.	Met all deadlines and facilitated the successful implementation of the mission of the group with enthusiasm and the highest competence.

Other			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
–	–	–	–

Quality of Outcome

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Student's contribution did not meet the needs of the community partner and/or did not meet the minimum standards	Student's contribution met the needs of the community partner.	Student's contribution met the needs of the community partner and was of high quality	Student's contribution exceeded the expectations of the community partner and was of the highest quality.

Extended Knowledge

Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
The final result of the student's contribution did not extend the project or the knowledge in this area significantly.	The final result of the student's contribution supported the project but did not extend the knowledge in this area significantly.	The final result of the student's contribution was a significant contribution to the project and extended the knowledge in this area significantly.	The final result of the student's contribution was critical to the success of the project and extended the knowledge in this area significantly.

Other			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
–	–	–	–

Table 2 (Cont.)

4. Define Career Path			
Transferable Skills			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Was not able to see that current project and experiences developed skills and /or how these skills could be transferred to other contexts.	Was able to see that current project and experiences developed skills and /or how these skills could be transferred to other contexts.	Was able to articulate the wide variety of skills developed through the experiences and was able to articulate how these skills could be transferred to a variety of other contexts.	Was able to articulate the wide variety of skills developed through the experiences and was able to articulate how these skills could be transferred to a wide variety of other contexts including the development of other competencies.
Connect to Personal Interests			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Showed little or no interest or capacity to apply current experience to own major or interests.	Showed some interest and ability to apply current experience to own major or interests.	Showed considerable interest and capacity to apply current experience to own major or interests.	Showed considerable interest and capacity to apply current experience to own major or interests including a further development and refinement/ articulation of personal interests, goals, and/or objectives.
Other			
Unsatisfactory	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
–	–	–	–

management. The analysis focused on examining the dimensionality of the client's perceived brand image within both served and potential market segments within the construction industry and also internally among employees. Result of this analysis yielded integrated marketing communication strategy recommendations to reposition and enhance the firm's competitive brand image. Key recommendations leading toward achieving a cohesive brand management strategy covered website development, use of traditional and social media, and internal sales training.

Following completion of this immersive learning project, two student team members were successful in securing construction management internships with the project client, one eventually hired as a full-time employee. Another project member was successful in securing employment with a competitive construction management firm upon graduation via connections made through the immersive project. A final student whose project role focused on developing social media strategy recommendations for the client, has formed his own media consulting firm and is quickly developing a regional client base. All students involved in this project reported high levels of satisfaction associated with their experience particularly regarding their exposure to material to which they otherwise would not have been exposed in their respective academic programs, thus underscoring the interdisciplinary value of the immersive learning experience.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes a model of interdisciplinary student-led project-based immersive learning developed and adapted campus-wide at Ball State

University and in particular within the university's business school. The paper distinguishes between immersive learning as a hallmark of the institution's overall competitive branding strategy and mission as a formalization of mere experiential education. The discussion further describes our institutional implementation model, presents an assessment rubric, outlines how immersive learning has been integrated into the business school's marketing program curriculum, and provides an illustrative example of a recent success story involving an immersive student-led marketing project.

Our university has found great success with immersive learning as a hallmark of our brand position and mission. More importantly, this model has provided our business students with exposure to in-depth, applied real-world problem solving and a means of giving them a jump start in entering today's competitive employment market.

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