

# The Role of Academia in Preparing Management Consultants

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## Abstract

The cyclical and counter- cyclical tendencies of the consulting industry and academia with respect to the economic cycles offers a unique opportunity for universities, particularly MBA programs to expand their role in training management consultants in preparation of the upcoming rebound of the global economies.

This study centers on the role of business schools in assisting in this process by examining the frequency, content and trend over time of management consulting related courses offered by top ranked and not top ranked American, and European universities. The pedagogical approach, with particular reference to field projects and learning objectives are also examined.

Our findings indicate a positive overall trend of more courses being offered, the importance of complementing classroom instruction with field projects and the tendency of American universities of lagging behind their international counterparts.

## Introduction

Management consulting is largely a cyclical industry that tends to follow the economic cycles of the global economy. The current recession is no exception, with a projected decline of 6.8% in consulting revenues for 2009. The strategy and IT sectors are expected to experience the steepest declines of 10% and 8% respectively (Kennedy Information, 2009a [1]). A possible recovery is expected starting in late 2010 with projected revenues of \$ 291billion in 2010 and \$ 306 billions in 2011 (Kennedy Information 2009b [2]) and the number of consultants climbing at an annual rate of 4.8% to account for well over a billion jobs by 2014 (Berman, 2005, p. 49 [3]). This consistent with the projected forecast for the global economy (Arthur D. Little, 2009 [4]).

At the same time management consulting is often seen as a desirable career for MBAs and since academia tends to be counter-cyclical; more people go back to school in economic downturns because they are jobless and want to enhance their career potential once the economy recovers. Furthermore, downturns in the economy necessitate career fall-back options such as independent consulting if one is caught in layoffs. Kennedy Information (2008) [5] forecasts that those who can offer financial benefits for their work and have specific areas of expertise can weather the economic decline. And, there seems to be a migration of MBAs previously planning to go into investment banking who are eyeing consulting (Kennedy Information, 2009a [2] ). When business spending rebounds the networking from consulting can lead to job offers or more consulting opportunities.

The combination of these cyclical trends offer a great opportunity for universities to expand their role in preparing future consultants and retraining displaced managers. Once dominated primarily by Ivy

League graduates to provide strategy solutions for clients, the management consulting industry has grown more recently to include IT, HR operations consulting and outsourcing of a wide range of professional services.

These changes have prompted firms to seek a broader set of schools for recruiting talent, to the point of even drawing from undergraduate programs to staff analyst positions with salaries in the \$56,000 to \$84,000 range (Wetfeet, 2009 [6]). Others are entering the field after several years of business experience at higher levels in the consulting career track of large firms (Vault, 2009 [7]) or starting their own consulting practices (Wetfeet, 2009 [6]).

Business schools that want their graduates to have the best career options need to prepare their graduates for consulting since, current downturn aside, this is a large, long term growing field that accommodates multiple career paths. At a minimum, business schools can prepare their graduates to be good consumers of consulting services as the industry resume its growth as a staple of the business world.

The underlying assumption in the consulting profession and in business schools is that a business degree, particularly an MBA, provides the necessary tools and skills for entering the consulting field. In reality, consulting firms have traditionally prepared novice consultants mainly through internal and on-the-job training, often to the dismay of clients footing high bills for services provided by junior consultants (Adams & Zanzi, 2004a [8], 2004b [9]). Yet, new consultants enter the industry each year without the benefit of the extensive training that most of the larger established firms provide. Academia has not adequately filled the gap in preparing graduates for entering or using the consulting profession as it exists today. Most notably, entry level consultants need to understand how to work with clients in field settings and conduct data collection for data-driven analysis and problem solving (Adams & Zanzi, 2001 [10], 2004a [8], 2004b [9]; Stumpf, 1999 [11]).

More often than not, a popular way academia seems to be responding unintentionally is to provide consulting experiences through field projects. These courses are primarily capstone or elective courses designed to integrate learning across disciplines and bridge theory to practice (Wankel & DeFillippi, 2005 [12]) through the development of competencies (Gundry & Buchko, 1996 [13]). They provide students a setting to practice the skills of analytical and problem solving, but not necessarily within a consulting framework. Students are rarely involved in true client management or the implementation of their recommendations (for example, see Adams, 2005 [14]; Clifford, Farran & Lodish [15], 2005; Fleenor, Raven & Ralston, 2005 [16]; Lundeberg & Mårtensson, 2005 [17]). Since most field experiences offered by business schools are not intended to prepare for careers in consulting, they do not include key topics critical to consultant success (e.g., project scoping, contracting, billing, and client management) and offer little regarding the career and life of a consultant. For example, students are not expected to understand their clients' limitations and political constraints for adopting a particular course of action or how consulting positions can lead to other career opportunities or how to enter the consulting field.

Given the growing attention to experiential field-based courses, we thought it important to understand just how prevalent they are and whether other management consulting courses are also being offered to more fully prepare graduates to enter the field of consulting. Using an analysis of an extensive survey of course offerings, the focus of this article is to summarize the current state of consulting course offerings and their content and pedagogy, critique the different uses and approaches of management consulting courses, and suggest ways to reap desired benefits. We contend that many schools could be well-positioned to become true training grounds for the practice of consulting and management of consultants by adding appropriate courses or adapting existing courses and field experiences.

## **Management consulting course offerings**

Adams and Zanzi (2001 [10], 2004a [8]) examined management consulting course offerings as the new millennium began. At that time, there were few offerings and most were in the top tier schools. Also, the predominant type of course was a field consulting course. In this study, we use a similar method to allow comparisons in the number courses, their content and the pedagogical approaches employed over time. Also, the global reach of consulting and businesses that use consulting led us to examine school offerings outside the United States in this study. This study approach allows us to see which business schools (by ranking and location) are addressing the growing need for more prepared consultants and how they are accomplishing that task.

### **Method**

#### **Sample 1.**

Data were collected in 2008 from school websites using the same aggregated list of top ranked business schools (from *Business Week*, *Princeton Review* and *U.S. News & World Report*) identified in the earlier studies conducted by Adams & Zanzi (2001 [10], 2004a [8], 2004b [9]). This sample of 60 schools was used to assess changes over time using the baselines of the earlier studies.

#### **Sample 2.**

Additionally, an expanded sample was created for more extensive analyses, such as examining course content and pedagogical approaches. The expanded sample includes the top ranked schools from the first sample that had courses in the earlier studies plus lower ranked schools and international schools known to have courses from the Management Consulting Division of the Academy of Management website list of business programs with management consulting courses. We also included additional schools mentioned in 2008 *Business Week* lists not on the top lists in the earlier studies so as not miss any top schools where consulting courses have traditionally resided. This precaution was taken because of the widespread assumption that consulting firms target top schools for recruitment. This second sample is comprised of 80 schools with 59 from the United States, 10 from Europe, 10 from Canada and one from Hong Kong.

### **Procedure**

Searching through descriptions of courses offered in undergraduate and graduate business programs, we examined current descriptions of courses identified as management consulting courses in their titles or descriptions. They were primarily offered by management departments but occasionally offered as MBA required courses. We excluded courses from other disciplines such as IT and psychology since they tend to operate in different domains. Data collected include the number of courses at graduate and undergraduate levels at each school, the content of courses and the method of delivery (i.e., field experience, lecture, cases-based, simulation).

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Longitudinal analysis (sample 1 analysis).**

Looking at the same list of schools from the original Adams & Zanzi study (2001 [10]) that examined course offerings of schools ranked by business periodicals, 27 (40%) of the schools offered courses in 2001 compared to 38 (56%) in 2008. In total, there is a net increase of 57 courses, ranging from a decrease of two courses at two schools to an increase of eight courses at the University of

Southern California that now offers ten different management consulting courses. Ten schools reduced the number of courses offered while 30 increased their offerings. There is clearly an increase in offerings over the seven year time period among these ranked schools both in offerings per school and in the number of schools offering courses.

**Global course offerings, course content and pedagogical approach (sample 2 analyses).**

The number of courses per school offered by schools outside the United States is significantly larger than inside the United States (See Table 1 for ANOVA results).

**Table 1. Course Offerings by Location and Ranking**

	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Mean (Standard Deviation)</b>	<b>F statistic (Significance Level)</b>
All U.S.	59	.93 (.907)	10.12 (p=.002)
All Outside U.S.	21	1.67 (.913)	
Ranked U.S.	11	.64 (.674)	7.385 (p=.015)
Ranked Non-U.S.	8	1.62 (.916)	

A mean of 1.67 courses are offered by schools outside the United States and a mean of .93 courses are offered by United States schools. Since consulting courses are presumed to be more abundant in ranked schools and since a greater percentage of non-ranked U.S. schools are part of the sample than non-ranked international schools, we decided to test location differences using just top ranked schools. The schools outside the United States offer significantly more courses than the U.S. schools among the top ranked schools as well as among all schools. Conversations with faculty in Europe who teach consulting courses revealed that the attitude of companies there is more favorable than in the United States regarding the use of university faculty and students as resources for consulting expertise.

A total of 60 schools offer at least one course in management consulting (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Management Consulting Course Offerings, 2002 and 2008 Ranked Schools**

	<b>Number (percent) of Schools</b>	
	<b>2002 (n=99)</b>	<b>2008 (n=60)</b>
Field course(s)	46 (47%)	27 (45%)
Classroom course(s)	45 (45%)	20 (33%)
Field & classroom courses	8 (8%)	13 (22%)

Nine schools offer courses at the undergraduate level and 56 schools offer courses at the graduate level. Forty of these schools offer courses with a field consulting project. Table 2 shows the number and percent of schools with course offerings by type of courses in 2002 (from Adams & Zanzi,

2004a [8]) and 2008. The percent of schools offering only a field consulting course remains relatively stable, yet there has been a shift to offer the combination of a classroom-based course in addition to a field course.

Table 3 shows the number and percent of schools that mention the use of various teaching methods and the inclusion of specified content. Field-based courses are the most popular teaching method for both ranked and unranked schools.

**Table 3. Classroom Methods and Content by Rank, 2008**

<b>Classroom Methods &amp; Content</b>	<b>Number of Ranked Schools (n=14)</b>	<b>Number of Unranked Schools (n=46)</b>	<b>Total Number of Schools (n=60)</b>
<b>Pedagogical Approach</b>			
Field-based course	8 (57%)	32 (70%)	40 (67%)
Simulation	1 (7%)	2 (4%)	3 (5%)
Cases	NA	12 (26%)	12 (20%)
Lecture	3 (21%)	16 (35%)	19 (32%)
<b>Course Content</b>			
Industry Trends	2 (14%)	8 (17%)	10 (17%)
Consulting Process	4 (29%)	24 (52%)	28 (47%)
Analytics	3 (21%)	23 (50%)	26 (43%)
Conflict & Change Mgt	0 (0%)	5 (11%)	5 (8%)

Within the classroom, lecturing is the most popular classroom approach. Examining the topics covered in classroom based courses, we found four major categories of content areas, consistent with previous studies of consultant development (cf., Adams & Zanzi, 2004b [9]; Moline, 1990 [18]; Stocker, 1996 [19]; Stumpf, 1999 [11]). Industry Trends includes an overview of the industry and life as a consultant. The Consulting Process covers methods used by consultants to manage projects and clients. Analytics involves how to collect, analyze and interpret data used to advise clients and Conflict Resolution/Change Management includes skill building to manage clients and client systems so that clients can manage change within their organizations. Interestingly, unranked schools were more forthcoming about course content and methods used in their course descriptions than ranked schools. Overall, schools mentioned covering the Consulting Process and Analytics more often than other aspects of consulting.

Post hoc interviews at an Academy of Management workshop in 2008 with 12 faculty that teach consulting courses in the United States and abroad provided additional insights regarding the findings noted above.

- The few schools with a substantive number of course offerings seem to have strong faculty sponsorship and consulting experience.
- Companies call on faculty expertise for consulting services more readily in schools outside the United States. Consequently, these schools are more often seen as a resource for student consulting recommended by faculty than those inside the United States. The newly announced MS degree in Management Consultancy from the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University testifies to this sentiment.

Finally, we examined topics covered in courses. Table 4 lists objectives typically found in course descriptions and syllabi and where we conclude from the data from this study those objectives are best taught based on the nature of the objectives.

Some objectives such as analyzing a real world situation and navigating an existing organization are best taught in an experiential format so students can see and feel the complexity not as apparent in distilled cases or simulations. As Lundeberg and Mårtensson (2005, pg. 59 [17]) conclude, “Many things you cannot learn by reading.” Real consulting situations require the ability to separate noise from data, political finesse and other situation-specific proactive and reactive skills that need to be practiced in real time. Practice is the key word for achieving these course objectives.

**Table 4. Learning Objectives for Consulting Courses by Pedagogic Format**

<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Field Experience</b>	<b>Classroom Course</b>
Real world analysis	X	
Navigating real organizations	X	
Managing consulting process	X	X
Managing change	X	X
Ethical decision making	X	X
Diagnosing conflict	X	X
Conflict resolution	X	X
Using global & cultural perspectives	X	X
Understanding consulting career options		X
Understanding industry trends		X

Other learning objectives meant to provide an understanding of a particular issue such as learning about consulting career options or industry trends are best conveyed in a traditional classroom setting. This is not to say that engaging methods should not be used. The use of guest speakers or interview assignments, for example, are wonderful ways for learn about how some people understand the industry and have careers in consulting. However, the instructor can provide the larger picture with

data, reading assignments, guest speakers and cases that intentionally highlight the intricacies of the industry and consulting careers.

The vast majority of learning objectives would benefit from attention in both the classroom and field. Students have different learning preferences that are best accommodated and nurtured through the combination of settings (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1991 [20]; Kolb, 1984) [21]. Most of the consulting skills that are often cited as learning objectives have conceptual and theoretical frameworks that can be taught in the classroom in preparation for field practice. A strong foundational understanding can prevent embarrassing moments which admittedly could be valuable learning experiences but do so by lengthening the learning curve. A prepared student starts with more confidence, at a higher level so they can advance further. After field practice, reflection harvests feedback for learning (Schön, 1983 [22]; 1987 [23]). It is not clear if classroom or formal reflection experiences incorporated as a post mortem exercise are being used in the existing field courses. Where noted, most list presentations to their clients as the concluding event. At a minimum, we suggest a debriefing event or exercise to make experiential lessons explicit.

### **Conclusions: preparing students for consulting**

The consulting industry continues to expand despite the current economic downturn and academic institutions are not properly preparing students to enter the field as consultants or to use consultants as practicing managers. Most courses are called field consulting courses but are not designed to prepare consultants. They are designed to develop practicing managers. More concerted attention to the field of consulting is good for students, schools, the profession of consulting, and consumers of consulting services.

Students can benefit from the additional skills developed and field knowledge that can prepare them to enter the field of consulting as internal consultants for companies or external consultants for established firms or independent consultants. Students are more effective consumers of consulting with a more in-depth understanding of how the field is structured, the various business models that consulting firms use, and the consulting process. Additionally, many consulting skills such as problem diagnosis and presenting implementable, data-driven recommendations are essential for practicing managers. Our data suggest that the combination of classroom and field experiences helps students learn to manage with more sophisticated skills for dealing with change and team dynamics. It helps them learn to move from one setting to another, assess political structures, and become more self confident and self regulating.

Business schools providing consulting courses can benefit in a number of ways. Potential students are likely to appreciate the consulting career option so recruitment could be enhanced. Connections to the consulting industry for guest speakers and internships and with client companies from consulting field courses can increase the institution's reputation in the business community and help placement efforts. We also note that in our experiences, both field and classroom consulting courses are very popular and sometimes oversubscribed by students. Students graduate with fond memories and deeper connections to the faculty and institution.

The consulting industry and profession benefit from higher quality recruits so that they will likely need to spend less on training and possibly avoid embarrassing mistakes by training consultants on the job. More importantly, classroom exposure to the role of ethics in consulting can begin to address the calls of many for more attention to the issue (e.g., Copeland, 2004 [24]; Kihn, 2005 [25]; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1998 [26]; O'Shea & Madigan, 1998 [27]; Pinault, 2001 [28]) which can lead to a better reputation for the profession and better results for consumers of consulting services.

## Next Steps

The existing state of course offerings in management consulting are not enough to properly prepare students for the consulting industry. While the number of schools offering both field and classroom learning experiences is rising, it is still overall very low. More schools need a balance of fieldwork and classroom-based conceptual learning about how to do consulting and to learn how to navigate consulting industry. The Academy's Management Consulting Division website (<http://division.aonline.org/mc/>) has examples of syllabi that members of the division share with others. They offer a variety of approaches and materials for instructors.

There is a growing literature that captures and investigates the various aspects of consulting. It offers a wealth of information for guiding the selection of classroom course topics and for guiding field consulting courses. Since field courses have been in existence longer and in greater numbers, there are plenty of books, articles and people available to help.

However, the study of management consulting is not highly regarded at this time as a field of academic inquiry. That means schools should be careful about involving tenure track faculty in these time consuming courses that have a low likelihood of links to research publications that will be valued by the academic community. The good news is that non-tenure track faculty are being used successfully in numerous existing programs.

We started this article by sharing facts about the management consulting industry and its relation to the economic downturn and anticipated recovery. Current circumstances offer an opportunity and a call for more attention from business schools. We end by saying that our study suggests ways to meet that call. The United States schools are lagging behind their international counterparts despite forecasts for growing demand so they can seek help from other parts of the world, especially Europe. Our course content analysis suggests that classroom and field approaches complement each other are best used together. We hope to see more offerings in both formats for the benefit of all involved in the near future. It is time to genuinely prepare our students for the field of consulting as a way to promote and respond to the anticipated global economic recovery.

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