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A Case Study Assignment (part 2)

Purpose of Part 2: In part 2, the assignment from part 1 is recapped and expounded upon. The second focus of part 2 is to provide you with support materials covering: how to engage with alumni; what makes a good case study and preplanning for the interviews you will conduct.

Recap of the Assignment

Teams

As noted in Part 1, depending upon overall class size and alumni volunteers, students will be assigned to teams of three or four, based, as best as possible, on their stated preferences for the type of case or area of study. For example students will indicate preferences for cases about: *strategic planning, marketing, operations, entrepreneurship, finance, human relations and culture or social enterprise.* As noted below, if alumni volunteers are insufficient due to class size, a random drawing will be held assign students to preparing Public Disclosure or Library cases (**Exhibit 1**). **Three documents are due from you to fulfill this assignment.**

1. **The case:** In your teams, prepare a case study as otherwise set forth in this assignment note and instructions. The body of the case should be no less than 7 pages, single spaced (font and size- Times New Roman 11) and no more than 11 pages. In addition to the body of the text, you should include relevant exhibits. They should not exceed 8 pages in length.

2. **The Teaching Notes:** In addition to the case study, which is group produced, you are expected to hand in, individually, your own teaching note of approximately 500-600 words. This note should:

- Include a short (75-100 word) case summary or synopsis;
- Include a statement of learning objectives (i.e. what the students can get out of this case);
- Suggest assignment questions (for student preparation of the case);
- Suggest discussion questions (for in the class to help get at more deeply embedded ideas).
- Include your analysis of the situation. (This is separate from what you recommend the protagonist should do). Note alternate analyses if any.
- Note your recommendations based on your analysis.
- End with any particular teaching methodologies such as board use, role-playing; team's set up, exercises, etc. that you think should be employed.

3. Takeaways: Last, you are expected to hand in, individually, your takeaways. Takeaways (250-500 words) are what you have learned from doing this project. Below are a few points that might help you think about that:

- By building your own case, you have placed yourself in the shoes of students, teachers, protagonists and everyone else. What has that been like?
- Report on surprises or findings that have enabled you to think outside the paradigm you came in with.
- Did you limit your thinking when you first read the assignment and if so, how might you have you broken through that.
- What distinctions have you noticed between being a consumer of cases versus a producer of one? Are there opportunities you hadn't seen before?

Grading

This case study represents 35% of your final grade. It has three components: the actual case study (22.5 points), the teaching notes (7.5 points based on the above outline) and the final takeaways (5points based on the depth of your reflection). Your case study is a group grade with each person getting the same grade. Your teaching notes and final takeaways are graded individually. The case study grades will be based on the quality of the project as follows:

Clear presentation of critical issue and decision facing protagonist and company	5 points
Clear presentation of potential options for decision making	5 points
Discussion that adequately provides students with relevant information for analysis of problem	5 points
Grammatically-correct writing with good syntax and word usage	5 points
Professional overall presentation of problem, options, background, and analysis	2.5 points

Key Dates and Schedule

Date	Task to be completed
February 10	Submit area of case study interest form
February 12	Teams assigned
February 13-16	Sign up for team meetings with Hanna for week of February 25
February 18 &19	Special sessions on writing cases with Hanna-choose one
February 25-28	Teams meet with Hannah- Online sign up. Prepare questions and agendas for interviews
March 1-25	Conduct interviews and commence writing
April 6-21	Write case and teaching note drafts
April 25	Case, teaching note, and takeaways are due

February 11-12 Special class sessions. Hanna Rodriguez-Farrar '87, '90 AM who works for the Harvard Business School as a research associate and case writer will be an assistant instructor for this part of the class and will be presenting a ***seminar on case writing for the class on the evenings of Wednesday February 11 and Thursday February 12. Participation on one evening is a required class commitment. If you are unable to attend the session for other than a Brown approved absence (ie. medical), please notify the instructor immediately. In addition, Hanna will be meeting individually with teams the week of February 17, 2004 per the online sign up schedule. This meeting is also required.*** The following materials are posted on the class website for your use in constructing your case study.

Organizations and Alumni

(See **Exhibit 2** for an overview of the alumni volunteers and the ground rules for interacting with them on this assignment.)

Teams will be assigned to a particular organization and you will be given an information sheet containing:

- Name, contact information and preferred method of contact for the alumni protagonist.
- The critical issue as described by the alumni protagonist.
- Ways to access basic information about the company. Most companies should be recognizable allowing you to do basic research online.

Students who wish to study a particular organization not listed but with whom they already have an alumni contact relationship should see he instructor.

In the event that we do not have enough alumni teams for the entire class, students will be assigned randomly to teams to write *Published Information* or *Library Cases.* These cases have the same learning objectives except for working and developing a relationship with an alum protagonist. *See note in appendix on Library Cases.*

While you will be working with alumni protagonists, it is your job, as individuals and as a team collectively to:

- Make sure that you stay on subject, clearly define in your own mind the critical issue and meet the criteria of writing an effective case set forth below. *Manage the scope of the paper so that you can develop a poignant case in the pages allotted.*
- Determine the appropriate data to collect and frame it for your case study. *Do not expect the alum, while older and most likely more experienced than you in their field to necessarily be more qualified or capable than your team to write the study.*

What Makes a Good Case?

According to Michael Robert, a professor at HBS, a good case is "both a good story and some analysis that students must perform after they've read it…A good case must pose an action question—a decision—and then permit the student to perform some piece of analysis that will shed light on the issues raised by this decision or problem…[also] to serve as a general lesson on how to approach problems of this type. … The student who performs this analysis should be rewarded with an insight into both the case protagonist's specific problems, as well as into this general class of issues. [1]

As a casewriter, you should focus on the following early in the casewriting process: the **issues** of the case; the **analysis** required to address those issues; the **data** required by students to address those issues satisfactorily; and, the **source** for the data.

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[1] Michael J. Roberts, "Developing a Teaching Case Abridged," HBS Case No. 9901 055 June 2000.

Louis Barnes, a well known casewriter, describes good cases as both fun and fascinating. For Barnes, good cases require:

> "inductive skills—reasoning from particulars to general statements in a Sherlock Holmes style while respecting that real events. stubbornly resist single, neat, logical solutions. Those that give ample details requiring pruning. A chance to speculate about "patterns and meanings that the details might suggest," or "extrapolate actions that case characters might take."

For a case to work, it should be contextual considering physical, emotional and cultural contexts but also specific character traits of the persons described. There is action and dialogue and they should recreate "a provocative, puzzling story." *While your alumni volunteer will effectively be screened to provide you with a situation, it is your job to craft it into a viable case study*"[2]

In the tradition of Barnes, these are the main elements of a successful case[3]:

1. A web of decisions that will lead to consequences.
2. A protagonist who, under pressure, must analyze a situation including identifying alternative courses of action,
3. A complex but not unusual context and setting.
4. Key participants with varying views of the issue.
5. A clear theme and major critical issue with different subissues, decisions and consequences.
6. A perplexed and possibly irritated protagonist.
7. Takeaways from the case which are applicable to other similar events.

What A Case is NOT[4]

A case is *not a piece of research.* In developing a case, you well learn some things that you did not know, and you will do research for the content of the case. You will go into the field with a strong set of ideas about how the world *does* work in order to discover the way one company does something. But without observing others in the industry, you won't know if this is an example of good practice or bad practice. You won't know if it's typical or atypical, or even if you've accurately captured one example.

Think about what teaching goal the case will serve. Expect the unexpected. Use the critical issue given to you by the alum to formulate a hypothesis, which in turn informs your questions and eventual analysis of the interview and other data. By definition your analysis is an informed opinion and the case a construction for teaching purposes. Given the space limitations of the case, you are

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[2] Teaching and the Case study Method pp 283-96 1994 Harvard Business School Press Louis B. Barnes, C. Roland Christensen and Abby J. Hansen. Several non applicable examples and parts have been removed usually indicated by "…" Some words have been added to make sense and to give direction to the student reader.

[3] ibid

[4] Michael J. Roberts, "Developing a Teaching Case Abridged," HBS Case No. 9901 055 June 2000.

forced to extract only the information important to the case purpose "not some abstract notion of what is true."[5]

Preparing for the Interview

Before facing the alumni protagonists, you need to do some preplanning. First, think about the syllabus and its different **areas of focus. Y**our case should fit into one of these areas. Consider **your audience**—a full range of Brown undergraduates with a limited knowledge of the subject. Remembering this is a survey course, decide what students should learn from the case.

Most teams will be writing decision-focus cases, where the protagonist has several choices to make and is unsure which direction to go. Even in a quantitative case, while the numbers will be important, a decision will most likely need to be made about how to use those numbers.[6]

Prior to making your first interview call and based on the critical issue you have been given, **prepare an industry and company overview for the alumni company**. Starting points might include:

- Reviewing public annual reports from the past few years;
- Thoroughly reading the company's website contents;
- Conducting searches on press releases or articles about the firm and the industry;
- Compiling an overview of the industry and the placement of the firm in that context.

From this initial research into the company, the industry and critical issue, you should be equipped to develop **a central theme or themes for the potential case.** For example, the themes could be a particular player in an interesting situation; a key decision by a group; or a specific organizational problem or issue. Having made this decision, **draft a potential case model or framework that relates to the issues you will be discussing**. Use the framework to help guide you rather than as a rigid, spoken questionnaire. Consider other cases as models for your framework.

Finally, plan the overall time schedule for all your interviews. Most interviews will be by phone. You need to: plan the logistics; brainstorm with the alum as to what material you need and who can provide it and prepare questions for each. Make sure you:

- Allow for 30 to 60 minutes for each interview at a time and date that works for your interviewee.
- Provide your interviewee with an agenda and interview guide.
- Organize your team *before* making the call; designate interviewer(s), note taker and sounding board roles.

[5] Adapted from Michael J. Roberts Developing a teaching Case Abridged, number 9901 055 June 2000
[6] 25 questions you ask as you begin to build a case study. HBS 9391042 Aug 1990

Sounding Boards[7]

Sounding boards are helpers and coaches, acting as a "reality check" when you lose perspective on the material. *In this class, one of the team members will act as the sounding board, as will the TAs for your group, Hannah and potentially, a writing fellow.* Their job is to provide an objective, disinterested perspective on the material. It starts with the research you gather and ends with the final submission. They also will help with question planning and sorting important data relevant to the key issues from less relevant subissues. Their separation from the writing process will actually speed things along as they will be able to judge if the writing is inviting, reasonable, contradictory, heavy handed, or missing that important fact or quote. They can let you know if your readers will be as close to the protagonist as you have been, allowing them to use case lessons in as broad a way as possible.

Last Preplanning Thoughts[8]

The relationship between you and your interview subjects must rest on a foundation of trust. The alumni volunteers are confiding details of what they consider an important issue. Treat the information they provide with respect and fairness. Let them review their own comments—letting them know that they have approval of the final case and its contents. (See **Exhibit 3** for approval form text.)

[7] Barnes

[8] Barnes

Exhibit 1 Publication or *Library* Case Note

In *Library* cases, you will compose a case based on public information such as is available from the Internet, newspapers, magazines, research reports and journals. These cases have to have their sources noted and be identified as coming from public and published sources. As such, they must be extensively footnoted. Further, the "credit line" at the bottom of the case must identify the case as "prepared from published sources." While in these cases, no embellishing of the situation can be done, such as adding or attributing information or actions to a particular individual, they will be similar to the field cases in most other respects.

Source: Case authors.

Exhibit 2 Ground Rules for Interacting with Alumni

The alumni you will be engaging with are volunteers. They are excited to be interacting with you. You can respect their time by making use of a few simple guidelines.

- Introduce yourself in your initial email. Inform the alumni of your interests and what you would like to get out of this project. Create a schedule of times to talk with your alum that work for them first, and then keep to the schedule. Arranging an in-person meeting would be ideal, but is not necessary to complete this assignment.
- Schedule length of times in advance and by agreement for your conversations and keep to those times. Alumni loathe cutting you short but you don't want to overstay your welcome.
- Create a protocol for interaction, i.e., by phone or email, to their preferred location for other than scheduled meetings.
- Organize your questions and send them collectively to the alumni.
- Obtain approval as set forth below of any direct quotes from the alum or other people in their organization.

Source: Case authors.

Exhibit 3 The Approval Process

First, judge how widely in the organization the draft will be distributed. If the case contains interviews with a dozen people in the company, you can be sure that lots of people are going to see it. Even if you are careful to communicate the stage of your work, the kind of feedback you want, your case will undoubtedly find its way into the hands of someone who didn't get the message, and who is surprised and disappointed with how rough it is. When there is a large group of people who will read the case—especially if there are any lawyers involved—you should send the company as polished a draft as possible. This entails obtaining the information in a series of follow-up phone calls, emails, and faxes. etc.

On the other hand, if you are working with a senior executive in a smaller company, where he/she is the only person who will be involved in approving the case, and if you have a good relationship with that person, and if you feel that you can communicate to the individual the purpose *of sending* that person the draft, this is an efficient way to work. Remember though, it is quite embarrassing to send someone a working draft on which you want just their substantive comments and have it come back line edited for style and punctuation. Do the extra work of polishing the draf.

Disguise

If you do disguise some or all of the data in the case, you should mention this in the "credit line" on the first page of the case. Company identity An alternative approach to the problem, of course, is to simply change the identity of the company."

The Approval Form

Unless this is a public source case, include the names and addresses of interviewees as an appendix at the end of your paper. In addition, upon completion of the project, provide two copies of the case study to the alumni highlighting direct quotes with your interviewees along with a box at the bottom of each page for them to initial as a sign of their approval of the contents of each page. They should return one fully signed copy to you, which you will hand in to the instructor.

In addition, at the end of a field case study (prior to the exhibits) insert the following lines: "I have reviewed the above case study and have made additions and corrections as I have deemed appropriate. On behalf of my company, this case study may be used for teaching purposes and made public to the Brown student body, alumni, administrators and other related personnel. I am comfortable with this material being made public in its corrected form. To the extent any data should not have been made public, I have disguised such data and it can be presented as currently set forth herein. Signed by ________________, Title "