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The Client with an Unsolvable Problem: Lessons from a Directed Experiential Education Project

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THE CLIENT WITH AN UNSOLVABLE PROBLEM: LESSONS FROM A DIRECTED EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION PROJECT

DESCRIPTION OF SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

The goal of an experiential education project is to provide a unique and enriching learning experience for the students.

In a 2021 project, meeting that goal while also helping an external client was a particular challenge, as the client presented the students with a problem that seemed to have no solution.

The client: A 400-room upscale hotel in Boston.

The students: Seven students who applied for the project and were selected by the faculty.

The format: A 3-credit Directed Experiential Education (DEE) course, conducted as part of the endowed Tiefel Project.

The problem: The hotel's laundry vendor was providing substandard service. In the past, the vendor had performed well. The vendor's service quality changed when the hotel reopened after the pandemic "lockdown". Sheets and towels were delivered late, most items were not folded, and many were stained. Housekeepers were therefore unable to clean the rooms efficiently and on time.

Changing laundry vendors was an unlikely solution, as this vendor had a virtual monopoly in the area. Investing in an onsite laundry facility at the hotel was a possibility but would be expensive. The hotel handed the problem to seven enthusiastic college students.

OUTCOME

The students researched the following questions and topics:

Benchmarking: How did other hotels in the city handle laundry operations?

Vendors: Were there other companies who could handle this hotel's laundry?

Site visits: To observe operations at the hotel and laundry plant

Literature: Was there any helpful information published?

Hotel reviews: A search of the main review sites to find posted complaints about linen or towels

Equipment: What would investing in onsite laundry equipment cost?

Cost-of-error report: The students calculated that the laundry problem was costing the hotel \$47138 per year.

The resulting recommendations included pre-sorting laundry and purchasing laundry equipment.

In 2021, a group of students participated in a Directed Experiential Education (DEE) course as part of the endowed Tiefel Project. The project involved an apparently unsolvable problem for a hotel. While the work was difficult and sometimes frustrating, the students discovered that their research and recommendations were useful to the client. The students gained skills and confidence from the experience.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTCOME

The instructor had to remember to focus on student learning as the main goal of this experience, even with the high-profile nature of the project, with a trusted hiring partner as a client.

Maintaining student motivation and morale was essential since the work could be frustrating at times. The client company was unwilling to share certain financial and other information that would have been helpful. Also, the client contact was handed the project at a late date by her predecessor, who had been promoted and transferred. She was dealing with the challenges of a new job during a stressful period and had limited time to communicate with the student group.

In the end, the students reported that it was a rewarding class, and that they especially appreciated the site visits and the interviews with the client and vendor. The client reported that she was impressed with the research and presentation, and that she was excited to share the final recommendations with her team.

A client problem that seemed unsolvable at the outset created opportunities for students to think critically, complement each other's skills and strengths, and apply research in a practical way.



Tiefel Scholars on the hotel balcony with the client, Boston Harbor in the background.