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A View from the C-Suite: Building Information Literacy Skills for Students in a High-Stakes Program

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Introduction

Since 1989, University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Executive MBA (EMBA) students have conducted 112 projects for more than 78 clients. Each new cohort of executives is tasked with strategic analysis and project planning for a company as part of their international project. The students' international consulting projects, which replaces a formal master's thesis, have taken students to 42 different countries with the number growing each year. In August 2017, a "stop by and introduce yourself as the librarian" orientation opportunity led to discussions later in the fall semester with the new program director about faculty plagiarism concerns and baseline EMBA research skills. Through these discussions we laid a foundation for stronger collaboration between UNO Libraries and the EMBA program. We set the groundwork in orientation and built upwards in subsequent weekends towards advanced corporate and industry research skills in the capstone course.

High Stakes Students

Law school students, medical school students, and student athletes can all be considered to have high stakes in their higher education program. All have a finite timeline for completion, a rigid academic regimen, and face immense pressure to perform based on their environment (Calhoun et al., 2016; Dyrbye et al., 2006; Egan, 2019; Glesner, 1990; Otey, 2014; Patel et al., 2015; Stone, 2012; Sung et al., 2009; Tanzer & Dintzner, 2017). This immense pressure to perform is different than the pressures faced by first-generation students (Hurd et al., 2018; Kundu, 2019; Lancaster, 2010), returning, mature, or nontraditional students (Jones et al., 2016; Manos et al., 2005), scholarship students (Frieswyk, 2019), student veterans ((Bryan et al., 2014; Norman et al., 2015), or students who are working a full-time job (Carnevale et al., 2015). Given that students' lives are often intersectional, however, these situations may overlap.

Based on the criterion of a finite timeline, a rigid academic regimen, and pressure to perform, the UNO EMBA program qualifies as a high-stakes program. It is structured so there is little opportunity for taking time off as the group of executive students moves through courses as a cohort. Many classes rely exclusively on group projects to enhance teamwork skills, furthering the students' dependency on their classmates to participate at all times. The 17-month, alternating-weekend program is a great fit for working professionals with responsibilities, but this weekend-intensive format is a high-stakes investment in time and resources for degree completion with little room for failed assignments or dropped courses.

Managing Expectations

Managing the expectations of both faculty and students in high-stakes programs is crucial for successful interactions. In this case, in addition to the weekend-intensive format, the EMBA program uses a concierge system. The UNO EMBA program staff oversees everything for the executive students. Staff schedules courses, buys and delivers textbooks, arranges parking permits, and makes international travel arrangements for capstone courses. Participants enjoy catered meals supplied every weekend and a large

variety of packaged snacks and beverages are always on hand to keep energy levels high and focus sharp. While these support services allow the executive students plenty of time to focus on cohort-based, collaborative learning, it creates challenges in the expectations of what services the business librarian will provide them.

Managing Student Expectations

The UNO EMBA program is comprised of a diverse group of professionals from varied personal and professional backgrounds. For example, the 2019 Cohort student is 39.6 years old, has an average of 17 years of professional experience, and averages nine years of management experience. Far from your typical first-year students, they are experienced in business, health, and/or technology industries and often hold degrees from a variety of academic disciplines with 17% of students having other additional post-graduate degrees. They may manage many people, large accounts, and/or budgets. It is quite a view from where they are sitting in the C-Suite! Empathy for each student's unique situation, patience with students struggling to understand the research process and available tools, and strong, consistent messaging about library services at orientation and throughout course presentations were the three keys to student success.

Earlier experiences, whether positive and negative, with libraries lead to personal expectations about UNO Libraries as a service support system for the executive students. EMBA students base their expectations for conducting research or using the library on their experiences with previous university libraries and/or librarians (if any) as well as their current experiences in the program. Initially, they may have library anxiety about using new resources (Grandy, 2019; McAfee, 2018; Wildemuth, 2017), learning an unfamiliar library system such as Library of Congress (Murphy et al., 2013), or using university library services in the United States compared to libraries in other countries (Click et al., 2016; Lu, 2012). Their research and writing skill levels range from students who have completed a thesis in another program within the last five years to those students whose last research paper was an undergraduate project 15 years ago. Executive students in the program have a wide spectrum of beginning, moderate, or advanced skills for writing graduate-level papers, using business databases and citation managers, and citing sources properly in APA format. Perhaps they had no formal information literacy training at their former institution, or they received library instruction in several courses. Some may also have had experience with a warm and inviting library atmosphere, while others' earlier interactions with library staff may have been stiff and cold when asking for help.

Students' own management styles and work environments also play a part in their expectations of what the librarian will provide, and consistent messaging about library services allowed students the opportunity to understand the librarian's role in their education. If they expect administrative staff to handle many of their details (both at work and for the EMBA program), they may assume the librarian will provide a similar array of personalized services, including preparing their bibliographies, conducting research and pulling together reading lists, proof-reading assignments, citation editing, and after-hours consultations. After several of requests for these services throughout the 2017-2018 academic year, it was clear the librarian needed a firm set of blueprints to communicate the difference between working *for* and working *with* these executives regarding their library research. There were boundaries set for professional services with some compromises: students should not expect email responses from the librarian after 5pm or on the weekends, but scheduled office hours changed to accommodate appointments needed after 5pm on certain days. Correct citation examples were freely given during appointments where students with questions corrected their own work, but assignments or reference pages would not be proofread, either in-person or through online submissions. Video office hours were set up as a possibility for students who wanted research help over lunch hours or while tending family responsibilities. Empathy for each unique situation, patience with students struggling to understand the research process and available tools, and strong, consistent messaging about library services at orientation and throughout course presentations were the three keys to student success.

Managing Faculty Expectations

Similar to any program where faculty expect students to come into the classroom with a basic level of knowledge that may or may not have been part of the students' lived experiences, faculty expectations for programs with high-stakes students often require a rebalancing. EMBA faculty were expecting executive students to perform complex research using government, corporate, and academic sources. Faculty assumed students would learn these skills on an ad hoc basis as they progressed through the program but gave little direction on how or where to learn these skills independently. Library curriculum needed to encompass everything from how to log in to library databases to how to gather current information about imports, exports, and cultural norms for analysis reports for international or multi-national companies.

The need for complex research skills training ensured that library presentations were an important part of the curriculum, but an unforeseen difficulty of this collaboration surfaced with last-minute presentations requests. The orientation schedule was set months in advance for the librarian to meet the cohort, but there were several spring semesters with last-minute changes in weekend meeting dates due to weather, travel restrictions, or personal circumstances. This created chaos in the program calendar as faculty scrambled to find alternatives, wedge content into shorter meeting periods, and still meet program learning outcomes. In several scenarios, the librarian was given less than a week to prepare for a Friday night or Saturday morning presentation. Compromises

helped manage faculty expectations for time versus presentation content. First, a shortened presentation slot meant mindfully selecting which student learning outcomes faculty wanted the librarian to achieve in class, while the remaining learning outcomes were relegated to office hour consultations. Second, faculty may accept another subject librarian teaching the class with an outline prepared by the business librarian if weekend appointments could not be rescheduled to suit EMBA calendars. Finally, faculty could forego the presentation altogether and have each group set a meeting with the librarian for personalized help during office hours.

In addition to balancing faculty expectations and scheduling, with high-stakes students there could be additional pressure for librarians and others at the university to help students succeed in other ways, particularly as enrollment and retention numbers play an ever-increasing role in academia (Burke, 2019; Carlson, 2020; Eide, 2018; Nietzel, 2019). Pressure on advisors, faculty, and student support services to help retention efforts for student athletes is well-documented (Brecht & Burnett, 2019; Cooper et al., 2017; Egan, 2019; Frieswyk, 2019; Hildenbrand et al., 2009; Rubin & Moses, 2017; Stone, 2012) as is the pressure of passing end-of-program exams such as United States Medical Licensing Exam (Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) and National Board of Medical Examiners® (NBME®), 2020) or the Uniform Bar Examination (Moeser, 2010). For instance, both unintentional and blatant plagiarism is a concern on campuses across the United States (Bethany, 2016; Garner & Hubbell, 2013; Gunnarsson et al., 2014) and the EMBA program was no exception. Faculty expected correct APA citations in all class assignments, which caused student anxiety until tools and techniques were provided, such as a library presentation explaining why citations are important in American university writing.

CURRICULUM

The 17-month EMBA program culminates with an international business consulting project where students integrate business theory and practice with real-world business objectives. With funding from corporate partnerships to produce practical solutions to assigned tasks, this project supplies a unique experience and is a highlight of the program. It also leads to a certain amount of pressure each year for the participants, similar to final student evaluations in other high-stakes programs (Klass, 1994). Through a series of progressive interactions with the EMBA program, UNO Libraries has built a foundation of orientation curriculum and capstone research skills that prepare the cohort for their international travel and consulting projects.

Immersion Weekend/"Orientation" – Fall Semester Year 1

In August, the cohort gathers for a three-day immersion program focusing on critical areas that will set students up for academic success and professional growth. Executive Leadership faculty and other experts guide the class through a complete overview of current leadership capabilities and students use that information to build a leadership development plan. The weekend also includes the one-credit executive communication course that focuses on improving business writing and presentation skills. As part of this curriculum, the librarian meets with the cohort for an hour to ensure library and interlibrary loan accounts are functioning and to introduce the Management LibGuide, which includes general business databases, journals, and ebook resources. Zotero and its uses for citation management, collaboration, and writing are discussed as well as expectations for avoiding plagiarism and the EMBA's preference for proper APA citation style in all coursework. Students practice keyword searches and are expected to find and submit two journal articles that cover a topic of interest as well as the correct citation for each by the end of the weekend.

Accounting Theory and Practice – Fall Semester Year 1

As one of the first courses the cohort takes together, this course enhances students' understanding of financial statements and how executive decisions can influence these statements. By understanding how management decisions are reflected in the financial statements, managers will understand how they can be used influence judgment. Building on the orientation weekend, the librarian meets with the cohort for 75 minutes to demonstrate searching in databases to find company and financial information for publicly and privately held companies. This is often many students' first experience with advanced database searching for items other than journal or newspaper articles and plenty of time is allotted for work during class with group collaboration encouraged.

Decision Analytics – Spring Semester Year 2

The first component of the international project is the Integrative Analysis report. EMBA teams conduct an integrative analysis focused on the viability of introducing a new or existing product or service into a foreign market. Areas of focus for the project include market research, decision analysis, data analytics, and business forecasting. Anecdotally, this is the most stressful and high-stakes course for students as they form groups and begin their extensive research preparation for the Capstone Report. The librarian meets with the cohort for 75-90 minutes to discuss conducting international research and how this differs from research conducted for undergraduate papers or even recent EMBA papers, both in time needed and sources used. After a brief review of sources appropriate for country, industry, consumer, and market information, students work independently in their teams to each review a source. Each member shares pertinent information they found (if any) with the group and then with the class. This activity

reinforces how much reading students will be expected to do for each source and how not every library resource on the Management LibGuide might be appropriate for their country, market, or business.

Seminar in Business Administration (Capstone) – Fall Semester Year 2

The EMBA program culminates with the Capstone Report, prepared by the teams, that delivers a focused, prescriptive market entry analysis including industry, company, and product-specific international opportunities and challenges in the country of interest. It is based on 1,200 person-hours of sophisticated research and analysis, including 30-50 on-site interviews with industry, government, consumer organizations, trade associations, and academic officials in the chosen country. There is no formal library classroom instruction. Student groups make appointments during office hours to receive specialized research help based on their needs as they prepare to travel to their respective countries. Some groups send one delegate with a list of questions and other groups bring all their members to meet with the librarian as a collective. Meeting with the librarian is not required for the course but highly encouraged by faculty members and program coordinators.

CONCLUSION

High-stakes students such as those found in medical school, law school, college athletics, and executive learner programs face great challenges in balancing both their academic and personal lives. Librarians must be careful to balance service and support for these programs and not bow to faculty or program pressure to pander to students because of their situations. Empathy, patience, and a firm foundation of expectations can ensure a smooth path for librarians when interacting with faculty and students in these programs.

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