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**FEATURE**

**The Nature of Management Dilemmas  
Used as Academic Projects  
in Higher Education**

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***Abstract:** This study investigated the management dilemmas of 53 business executives, the resolution of which were critical to the sustainable growth of their companies. These dilemmas provided internship project opportunities for graduate management students. Career planning and business mentoring strategies were integrated in the conceptualization, implementation, and completion of all internship projects. The study involved a total of 76 business academe partnership (BAP) projects from school years 2002 to 2005. Completed projects were grouped into four clusters. These were: (1) expansion (38 projects), (2) streamlining operations and leveraging core capabilities (22 projects), (3) employee commitment and productivity enhancement (11 projects) and (4) capital infusion for new businesses (7 projects). Student interns, assisted by seasoned business coaches, completed their projects within six months. Steps in the development of internship projects based on management dilemmas are also described in the paper.*

Colleges and universities must develop and implement curricula relevant and useful to students, who are the future workforce. In order to satisfy future employers and employees, it is appropriate for tertiary schools to test the quality of future professionals they are developing. The establishment of business-academe partnerships (BAPs), through internships or residency programs for senior or graduate students, provides an excellent opportunity for colleges and universities to test and increase the caliber of their future professionals.

The participants in this study were students in a five-year Master of Science in Management (MSCM) program at a Philippine university. During their final year, MSCM students are placed as junior management consultants for 5-6

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months, in a BAP program. As junior management consultants, they need to understand the nature of actual management dilemmas presented by executives, which are the springboard for the development and design of an internship project. Successful completion of the projects by MSCM students enhances the relevance of the coursework and curriculum in the program.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Business executives occupy strategic positions in their respective organizations. To carry out their responsibilities, these individuals need updated, well-analyzed data that will allow them to effectively make decisions that will improve operations. However, executives may not have the cadre of human capital and technology resources needed to address their management dilemmas.

Filipino executives need to develop strategic perspectives and methods of management portfolio that is not only sensitive to the Filipino culture of management, but also effective for a developing country. For this reason, Filipino executives are worthwhile subjects to study due to their vital role in sustaining the company's operations. However, they possess the propensity to burnout risk factors that lead to the deterioration of their personal wellbeing (Dy, 2002). Thus, the management dilemmas they have are opportunities for academe to assist them in creating effective organizations. With a knowledge of burnout risk factors, business executives can address business issues and become credible partners of top management in strategy formulation and implementation (Ulrich, 1999).

During the BAP, career counselors, together with the academic research team are able to network with business executives. Through this process, faculty and administrative staff can also improve in areas such as career planning, talent management, organizational knowledge management, coaching, and facilitation of organizational change. These are crucial HR areas of focus. In the process, faculty are able to function as learning strategists, business partners, project managers and professional specialists (Davies, Naughton & Rothwell, 2004).

BAPs provide faculty with updated information about business trends and human capital requirements (Riesenkönig, as cited in Dy, 2002; Graff, Heiman & Zilberman, 2002). The information students gain from BAP projects is accurate and reliable since there is constant two-way communication between the student and the business partner, who has a stake in both the process and outcome of the project.

BAP projects are not only effective, but also convenient, readily available, and even cost-effective. They look into the long-term direction of the company as well as the operational guidelines and practices that must be reviewed and thoroughly implemented to achieve the company's long term objectives. A BAP

does not require large capital outlays, additional staff, or organizational changes that could interrupt normal working relationships. Business partners provide management dilemmas and company-based supervisors, while academe provides the manpower and expertise to investigate the dilemmas and provide vital information and suggested solutions.

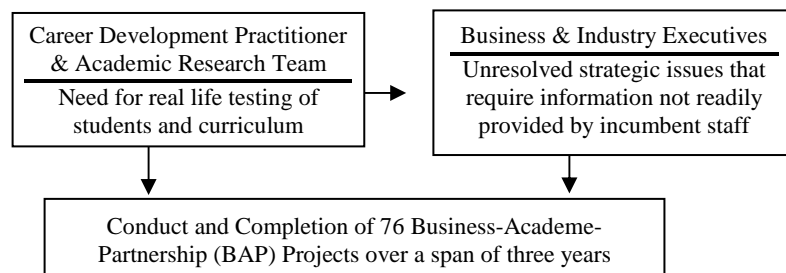
In summary, partnerships between business and academe are opportunities for business executives to obtain information to address their management dilemmas. The BAP is equally valuable for academe as it gives students hands-on experience in applying classroom-based theories and conducting case studies that will enhance their performance in the workplace after graduation. Lastly, the BAP can demonstrate the strategic role of the career development professional as a learning strategist, business partner, project manager, and professional specialist. The variables in this study are shown in Figure 1.

**Research Questions**

1. What management issues faced by Filipino executives are of strategic value?
2. What were the components of the career development intervention that sought to address the various management issues of executives?
3. What competencies do career counselors require to effectively support business and industry decision-makers in managing internship projects?

**Method**

This qualitative study involved the analysis of 76 business-academe projects completed by graduate management interns. The various projects included providing information and strategies to a group of Filipino executives based on the different management dilemmas they had at that time.



*Figure 1.* Variables in this study.

### *Participants*

*The Researcher.* The researcher is an academician who, in June, 2002, was assigned the job of creating real, consulting internship projects that would give graduate management interns work experience to integrate classroom learning and the actual workplace. McLagan's competency wheel model (McLagan, 1997) was applied using competency-based resumes of over 360 fourth-year management students to match them to appropriate internship projects. The competency wheel model was also used in describing the win-win outputs of the partnership to both business and academy.

*Business Executives.* The first batch of business executives were graduates of the eleven month "Executive Certificate in Strategic Business Economics Program." All held strategic positions in their organizations. They had real management dilemmas that were not being resolved. There were eight focus group discussions attended by 10-13 executives per session throughout the three year-period covered by this study.

*Graduate Management Interns.* These were the top 30 per cent of students who qualified to pursue the five-year Master of Science in Management degree. They had completed 91 units of course work, 3 units of corporate immersion, and 6 units of research prior to BAP projects.

*Project Coaches.* These were faculty members with at least a master's degree and experience in project management and consulting. Their competency portfolio was a critical basis for selection and assignment as project coach. They coached students to complete the project and were involved in helping students balance their personal lives as they coped with the demands of the client company during the internship.

*Academe-Based Research Team.* A supportive and visionary dean provided the infrastructure needed for the project. He also provided the network of executives and professional mentors who were not faculty. The research team was composed of the following: (1) One business-academe partnership coordinator and strategic HR professional for the first two years; (2) one junior BAP coordinator who supervised the program in its third year of operation under the mentorship of the HR professional; (3) 100 graduate management interns; (3) BAP mentors/coaches assigned to each intern or group of interns, (4) 42 business executives from 48 companies, representing 21 industry groups, resulting in a total of 73 completed projects.

**Phases**

The internship program consisted of 13 different phases that were managed by a team of faculty members and administrative staff.

**Results**

Table 1 shows eleven kinds of management dilemmas expressed by the business executives over the three years. These business dilemmas show internship project opportunities for graduate students to work on. It also shows the number of projects completed for each type.

Table 1

*Classification of Management Dilemmas by Topics*

Topics of different management dilemmas	Number of projects per topic
1. Leveraging core competencies and capabilities to streamline operations	17
2. Positioning new products and services	14
3. Expansion of business (local & abroad)	9
4. Improving revenues through sales	8
5. Customer relationship management	7
6. Employee productivity especially among sales personnel	6
7. Coping with employee turnover rate	5
8. Business start up needs	5
9. Setting up competency-based HR systems	3
10. Infusion of new capital	1
11. Improving performance of retail markets	1
Total number of projects	<b>76</b>

Table 2 shows four clusters of management dilemmas culled from the 11 categories of management dilemmas shown in Table 1. The four clusters of management dilemmas represented key performance areas that a CEO or general manager would look into for a quick strategic assessment of the company's operations that is vital for its long-term survival (Coffey, 2000). A variety of projects were carried out. Expansion projects, included projects such as industry study, competitive strategy, and marketing research. Leveraging core capabilities included projects such as a performance evaluation programs, performance analysis, procedural gap analysis, and the preparation of an operations standards manual. Employee commitment projects included hiring and retention strategies, and a perception study on employee resistance to organizational change. Finally, the start up cluster referred to such projects as market analysis and feasibility studies, industry studies, and the development of new products and services.

Table 2  
*Classification of Management Dilemmas by Clusters*

Cluster Title	Definition	Number of projects
<b>Expansion</b>	Expansion to domestic and international markets; increasing revenue through sales of existing products; and positioning strategy for new products and services and improvement of customer relationship management strategies	38
<b>Leveraging core capabilities</b>	Leveraging core capabilities to streamline operations; Installation of competency-based HR systems, focus on developing new products and services, and conversion of service units into profit centers	22
<b>Employee commitment and productivity</b>	Strategies to enhance employee commitment & productivity in the context of ongoing organizational changes in uncertain economic, political and social milieu in the glocal marketplace	11
<b>Startup</b>	How to start a business, capital infusion from prospective investors & improvement of sales through retail markets	7

***Cluster One: Expansion***

The first cluster of management dilemmas was addressed by 38 projects. This cluster included concerns about how to expand operations to both domestic and international markets. Expansion activities to international markets will likely involve the transfer of manufacturing operations to China or Vietnam due to cheaper labor costs. Although such moves almost always incur initial capital outlay, the long-term savings on cost-effective manpower will outweigh the capital invested for the transfer of manufacturing operations. This means that certain jobs will disappear in the Philippines and workers will have to take early retirement or go through other separation strategies in accordance with Philippine labor laws. Expansion to international markets may also mean opening new local branches where regular operations will continue, while expansion activities are simultaneously implemented in foreign countries (Benton, 1999; Ettenberg, 2002).

Local expansion of operations in cities and towns, on the other hand, requires market research, specifically of consumer behavior and decision-making patterns. In fact, certain products are not popular in the cities but have generated profits in rural areas. This strategy is similar to that of Walmart, who decided not to compete with other brands that were popularly distributed in the cities but created markets for its products in rural areas (Collins & Porras, 1996).

This cluster also showed that some client companies were able to develop new products and services, but realized that they needed assistance in formulating a strategy to attract customers who could afford their prices. There were also concerns about keeping preferred customers who provide companies with profitable relationships as well as new businesses (Ettenberg, 2002).

Formulation of an operations and procedures manual in accordance with ISO certification standards implies that the executive is looking at the possibility of partnering with foreign investors or international partners to expand operations to the United States. This would generate revenues from new business units while engaged in the same products and services. Feasibility studies, with or without a business plan, precede start-up ventures expected to generate new sources of revenues. Expansion strategies of new business initiatives are opportunistic activities to act on areas of possible growth in order to augment current operations which may be facing intense competition.

Industry studies and competitor analyses are stand-alone projects, but constitute necessary research that will provide vital information for conducting comprehensive marketing strategies. All projects in this cluster clearly implied that executives are looking out for other revenue-generating activities. Industry study and competitor analysis used Michael Porter's five-factor model for studying the behavior of key players in an industry. These are new entrants, suppliers, buyers, and substitutes, which all interact among each other, creating

rivalry and competition for customers (Porter, 2004). Updated data are needed on each of the five factors so analysis of competitor activities can be determined; from this the executive team of a company can reposition its limited resources and focus on its core capabilities so as not to be overrun by competition, whether it be an existing one, a new entrant, or a substitute.

The dilemmas in the first cluster are strategic in nature; they have long term impact on the performance of their companies. Failure to resolve these dilemmas or act upon them effectively as soon as possible will threaten sustainable operations and may lead to bankruptcy. Since cluster 1 dilemmas are strategic and long term in their effects on the organization, they require intervention that goes beyond delivering short-term outputs. Cluster 1 dilemmas require interventions that will impact both short-term and long-term operations.

All the projects conducted in response to cluster 1 management dilemmas strongly suggest that management research is needed. However, management research is equally needed even though the desired interventions may have an immediate or short-term impact, since this will help eliminate the occurrence of future short-term dilemmas as well.

Top executives and members of the top management team need to have research facilities readily available. However, most of their work is involved in 'fire-fighting' activities on a routine or periodic basis. Most of their employees were hired using traditional recruitment and hiring strategies to fill existing positions that impact immediate concerns, without looking at the long-term value of the specific position at the time of hiring. Management research competencies are not popularly considered to be one of the core competencies of management trainees, managers, or even of executives being hired. Current hiring practices of client companies in this study are the usual assessment tests: scrutiny of applicant's past work experiences, education, relevant training, networks, and revenues generated for former employers.

The advance of technology, including information and communication technology, is proceeding at a rapid pace. Businesses are often surprised to find that their preferred customers have transferred to a competitor who offered them a better deal, or that their best people have been poached by a more powerful competitor who promised them a better work life and compensation package. Employees who remain usually possess a traditional portfolio of skills that are either not marketable in another industry or not adaptable to multi-tasking job assignments. The more adaptable employees, become multipreneurs (having two or more simultaneous projects outside of their main employer) or seek opportunities elsewhere. Companies who hire employees with robust management research skills are usually consulting firms, planning and development units of government institutions, intelligence and security types of businesses, and academe.



It seems that CEOs and their executives in this sample of client companies are not aware of the long-term impact of management research skills. They may not be using enough research-based data and hence may not have developed a robust strategic perspective in understanding their industry and in managing their organizations. The concern for survival, profitability, and satisfying shareholders seems to be their main thrust, as these concerns may not, at first glance, require management research skills.

### ***Cluster Two: Leveraging Core Capabilities***

The second cluster of management dilemmas was addressed by 22 projects. In this cluster, executives were concerned about how to leverage or build on their core capabilities, which must be preserved as they streamline operations and possibly outsource routine and repetitive tasks.

Performance reviews of business processes and employee performance using international standards are essential to discovering and understanding performance gaps. This is essential to improving business processes, and it is important for employees to have easy access to international performance standards. This strategy, if done effectively, will reduce costs in the short term and increase revenues in the medium term. The development and implementation of a competency-based performance evaluation instrument requires industry study and competitor analysis, since information will provide insight on the emerging core competencies or cadre of human capital required to leverage on the limited but vital core business processes to achieve profit objectives while preserving employee wellbeing. This intervention will reduce costs by focusing on high impact work processes and jobs while eliminating those that are peripheral to the core business by outsourcing them. Executives realize that, by focusing on the company's limited core capabilities, they can engage in more effective market segmentation studies that are revenue-generating (Campbell & Sommers-Luchs, 1997, as cited in Dy, 2002; McLagan, 1997).

Competency-based performance evaluation instruments and a recommended performance evaluation program are based on the vision, mission, and objectives of the company. Competency-based performance interventions look into the performance of the company and consider individual performance, specifically of sales and service personnel for at least the last three years. This is followed by analyzing the performance gaps at the corporate and individual levels, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses at the corporate and individual levels, looking into the core capabilities of the client company, and getting updates on competition by applying Porter's five-factor theory. Also, there is a need to formulate performance criteria and put in place a performance evaluation system that leverages the company's limited resources, strengths, and success experiences (Campbell & Sommers-Luchs, 1997 as cited in Dy, 2002).

The conduct of performance reviews, identification of learning gaps, and development of a training program for the sales personnel are deemed essential in reducing costs. Such a training program will generate more revenues if it is evaluated in terms of its direct contribution to outputs and revenues generated as a result of investment in improving certain knowledge areas and critical skills (McLagan, 1997).

Cluster two dilemmas require interventions that will impact both short-term and long-term operations of the company. It seems that CEOs and their executives in this sample of client companies are not aware of the long-term impact of management research skills. Because of this, they may not be using enough research-based data and hence may not have developed a robust strategic perspective to understand their industry and manage their organizations. The concern for survival, profitability, and satisfaction of shareholders are repeated themes that emerge as the main thrusts of top executives. At first glance, responding to these may not require management research skills. When corporate crises arise and top management has no way out but still wants to remain in their plush offices and protect their investments, they hire popular but expensive management consultants who promise to heal or solve serious management crises. Such business dilemmas seldom respond to the band-aid type of management interventions. Ultimately, the results would be the reduction of operational effectiveness, or the disappearance of certain jobs. These are often resorted to when revenues plummet consistently even if curative or band-aid-type of interventions are installed. The undesirable result is, of course, bankruptcy and shame (Hambrick & D'aveni, 1992; Gilad, 1997; Cruver, 2002, both as cited in Dy, 2002; Paul & Cox, 2003, as cited in Dy, 2004).

### ***Cluster Three: Employee Commitment and Productivity***

The third cluster of management dilemmas was addressed by 11 projects. Here executives were concerned about how to address decreasing employee commitment and productivity, as well as fast turnover rate, especially among key or strategic personnel. The projects in this cluster involved hiring strategy, retention strategy, and a competency-based succession planning program for critical leadership and management positions, which are essential in reducing recruitment and training costs. The participating companies in this study used traditional practices for hiring. They may need to learn more relevant and robust hiring processes.

Projects intended to measure the levels of employee resistance to ongoing organizational changes may not directly impact cost reduction or increase revenues. Nonetheless, the results of the intervention will provide top management with the insight needed to understand the kind of organizational

climate that will facilitate employee cooperation during organization-wide changes. If such changes are not effectively managed, the mental and emotional energies of employees will be diverted to resistance and resentment, which will drastically affect productivity and commitment in the long term. It can be safely implied that perception studies indirectly contribute to the reduction of costs as these studies provide management with information on the most effective strategies to facilitate needed organizational changes to improve performance with the least resistance from employees (Williams, Woodward, & Dobson, 2002).

Job evaluations were done in the context of a complete reorganization and the concurrent conversion of service and support units into strategic business units or semiautonomous work units, similar to profit centers. This intervention was intended to respond to employee complaints regarding increased work load, more complex tasks, and more superiors to report to, with no adjustment in salary. If top management continuously ignores employee complaints, performance will plummet, revenues will deteriorate, and employees will ultimately transfer to competitors who pick their brains regarding technology from their previous employer. In such a case, the organization will rehire and retrain, and probably generate new products or services to survive competition. This activity will require investment that will not reap gains in the short term.

Third cluster dilemmas are strategic in nature: they have a long-term impact on the performance of the company. If these dilemmas are not resolved effectively, at the earliest possible time, this neglect will ultimately threaten sustainable operations, and could lead to bankruptcy. While cluster two dilemmas are also strategic or long-term in their effects on the organization, third cluster dilemmas require an intervention that goes well beyond delivering short-term outputs.

Cluster three dilemmas require interventions that impact both the short-term and long-term operations of the company. They suggest that CEOs and their executives in this sample have not invested in company-based research or technology development units that are the springboard for innovative ideas needed to formulate new products and services critical in the face of fierce competition. Neither have these CEOs invested in hiring and developing managers or line people in management research to address management dilemmas. Thus, earlier observations of the lack of strategic thinking among Filipino executives seems to be reinforced in this study (Canadian SMED Development Strategy for Philippine SMEs, 1993 as cited in Dy, 2002).

#### ***Cluster Four: Startup***

The fourth cluster of management dilemmas was addressed by seven projects. This cluster showed that executives were concerned about how to start

new business ventures, how to obtain additional investors to expand a form of agribusiness and how to improve the performance of retail markets. As mentioned earlier, the conduct of industry studies and the development of new products and services, consequent market research, positioning strategy, feasibility, and business plans are critical in generating additional opportunities to tap new targets for the infusion of capital intended to generate revenue. The dilemmas presented and the subsequent projects reinforce the urgent need of business executives for critical information in real time that will provide them with the insight to develop robust options to address their business needs. The lack of in-house personnel to address the research or information needs of business executives is a symptom of the lack of appreciation by top management for the strategic value of management research as a core competency of its managers and executives for understanding and addressing business dilemmas.

### **The Life Cycle of a BAP Project**

Table 3 shows the 13 phases of the career development intervention which was conducted for three years and which is still being conducted in the present (i.e. three years after the study was finally documented). The 13 phases were based on anecdotal records that were developed in the first year of the project and were repeated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years. Phase one involved career planning sessions which culminated in the development of a competency-based resume. The resume highlighted the project outputs of students at the end of their 4<sup>th</sup> year and at the end of the first semester of their 5<sup>th</sup> year. Phases two to six involved networking and strengthening alliances with key decision-makers from business and industry. This was facilitated by a supportive school administrator. The career counselor's interactive dialogues with business executives required the demonstration of empathy, application of research skills and a sound knowledge of project management. This was necessary in the formulation of project proposals that earned the respect and support of business executives as well as the various business coaches/mentors. Phases 7-8 are commonly known among career development practitioners as the placement services of a typical career guidance and placement office in the context of higher education. Phase 9 involved the actual and simultaneous conduct of the various projects. Lastly, phases 10-13 included the presentation of management reports to the top management team of the business partners and to the academic research faculty team of the school. This culminated in an evaluation of the projects and the program on a yearly basis for three successive years.

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Table 3  
*Components of the Career Management Intervention  
Infused in the Internship Program.*

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**Phase 1:** Conduct of an Output-based Career Planning workshop where students identified their top three management competencies and top three preferred industries to work in. Workshop culminated in formulating personalized competency-based resume (outputs identified, not just tasks or activities conducted) during a separate resume writing workshop for both 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year students. The 4<sup>th</sup> year students did 2.5-month projects, and 5<sup>th</sup> year students completed the 5-6-month internships described in this paper.

**Phase 2:** Formulation of the concept model by the researcher for sourcing out strategic business projects that will address the strategic business issues of executives.

**Phase 3:** Pilot session for the first focus group discussion (FGD) involving top executives and their issues/dilemmas that could not be addressed by incumbent staff but were of significant concern to them.

**Phase 4:** Conduct of consequent FGD sessions with executives and company representatives & one-on-one sessions.

**Phase 5:** Conduct of an orientation-workshop to the BAP coaches.

**Phase 6:** Identification of the projects to be implemented

**Phase 7:** Matching of student interns to project requirements and assignment of mentors.

**Phase 8:** Presentation of student interns, BAP coaches to the business partners

**Phase 9:** Implementation of the BAP project

**Phase 10:** Completion of the BAP project

**Phase 11:** Presentation of the completed project/research paper with observations and suggestions to the Board or Top Management Team of the business partner.

**Phase 12:** Presentation of the research project to the research committee of the academic program.

**Phase 13:** Evaluation of the project by:

BAP partner

Inputs for the Internship

Curricular review and relevance

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### Competencies Needed by Academe for BAP

Table 4 shows the competencies demonstrated by the career counselor deemed helpful in getting the support of business executives to provide relevant projects for management interns. The operational definition of *competency* used in this study was endorsed by the American Society for Training and Development (McLagan, 1997). This model is relevant to the needs of business as it emphasizes the observability, measurability, and predictability of human capital outputs that can be further translated into financial terms and economic indicators. Such cannot be done by identifying knowledge, skills and attitudes that is commonly used in non-competency-based projects.

Table 4  
*Required Career Counselor Competencies*

Competencies	Details
Knowledge requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts of counseling psychology focusing on industry</li> <li>• Strategic thinking &amp; management</li> <li>• Competency Model</li> <li>• Competency-based resume writing</li> <li>• Positioning strategy</li> <li>• Burnout risk factors of executives</li> <li>• Network of at least 70 business executives</li> <li>• Project Management</li> <li>• Hierarchy of management research process</li> </ul>
Skills required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathize with business executives</li> <li>• Extrapolate themes of business projects based on management issues articulated by business executives</li> <li>• Effective teamwork skills</li> <li>• Management of faculty, business practitioners –mentors</li> <li>• Career planning with competency-based resume writing skills</li> </ul>
Perspective (attitudes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal mission to address the wellbeing needs of executives who are the wealth creators of a nation</li> </ul>
Performance output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formulated the conceptual model for internship projects</li> <li>• Developed the entire process of the internship program</li> <li>• Facilitated the production of competency-based resumes of the management interns via career planning sessions</li> <li>• Facilitated matching of project requirements with competency profiles of management interns</li> <li>• Facilitated the matching of business mentors to the requirements of the project</li> <li>• Facilitated the presentation of completed projects with the top management team of the business partner and later with the academic research team of university</li> </ul>

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### **Conclusion**

What do the 76 completed internship projects demonstrate regarding the nature of academic initiatives which business executives will support? This three-year study shows that business and industry decision-makers strongly support academe-based programs that are relevant, helpful, and uniquely address their business needs. Projects supported were research-related in nature, strategic in value, and sustainable in impact.

The process of setting up and supporting business-academe partnerships is complex, made up of multiple steps, and requires many different skills by the academic support team which serve as support for the student interns, as well as facilitators of the linkages with the businesses. Business partnerships fell into four basic clusters of needs, which were described in this paper.

Management research is one of several competencies required of any manager. Based on the information drawn from the analysis of the projects cited in this study, it seems that academic programs specializing in business and management degree programs strengthen their curriculum by using problem-focused learning interventions that yield evidenced-based outputs. These outputs either shed light on the nature and causes of management dilemmas, or address loopholes and performance gaps that threaten the sustainability of the company's operations. This real-life experience not only improves the curriculum for the business students, but also assists local businesses in areas where they might lack personnel or expertise.

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