
Evaluation of Outsourcing in Higher Education: A Teaching Case

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Abstract: Case studies are becoming popular as an innovative method of learning. This case study provides students with guidelines in gaining an understanding of outsourcing practices in higher education. It requires students to obtain a higher education institution that has outsourced its services/functions as a client, and to gain an understanding of the processes involved, effects of outsourcing decision and future trends of outsourcing. This can be administered as an individual or group assignment. Students should develop a plan of action based on their observations.

Introduction

Case studies are becoming popular as an innovative method of learning. This case study gives students an opportunity to gain an understanding of outsourcing practices in higher education. The case requires students (a) to obtain a higher education institution (a college/university) that has outsourced its services/functions as a client, (b) to gain an understanding of the processes involved (c) identify benefits and limitations of outsourcing decision and (d) develop a plan of action to overcome those limitations and for use in future outsourcing decisions. In addition, students are required do an oral presentation in the class in the same way a business consultant presents his/her findings of the project to the board of trustees of the college/university. Students must make arrangements to meet with relevant college/university administrators to inquire about the institution's outsourcing practices in the same way a business consultant meet with the administrative team of a client. This project is designed as a group assignment but it can be administered as an individual project.

Gaining an understanding of outsourcing in Higher Education

The objective of this study is to examine the concept of outsourcing in an institution of higher education (a college/university). It is expected to provide data on the satisfaction level with outsourcing, the benefits and limitations of outsourcing, the processes employed when implementing outsourcing decision and the reasons given by respondents for outsourcing. Obtain a college or university that has outsourced its services/functions as your group's research client. Many higher education institutions in North

America have outsourced their support services and functions and you can choose any category of institutions such as Doctoral Institutions, Master's Institutions or Baccalaureate Institutions depending on the ease of gaining access to and collecting data. Obviously, a higher education institution has more than one administrator involved in outsourcing decisions. You can choose presidents, vice-presidents and other relevant administrators as your respondents. You may wish to interview some non-managerial employees, students and alumni of the college/university. Your group should make arrangements to access to your respondents. It is very important to keep accurate records of your meetings with the college or university administrators. You can ask your professor to write an introductory letter to the administrators of the higher education institution, if required.

It is advisable to prepare a list of questions or topic areas of outsourcing prior to meeting with your respondents. Your group members should gain a thorough understanding of outsourcing in higher education so that you can direct your discussions with administrators in a fruitful manner as necessary. Write a narrative description of outsourcing strategies used in the college/university and identify their benefits and limitations. You can use tables, figures or any other devices to present your findings. You may encounter some limitations in outsourcing practices in your investigation. Your group can present suggestions to overcome them. College or university administrators have many options with regard to the implementation of outsourcing strategies and they will consider the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy on the institutions goals, objectives, culture, human resource and other relevant issues.

As business consultants, you group should consider the advantages and disadvantages of your suggestions to improve outsourcing practices in the chosen higher education institution. You should consider the suitability and practicability of your suggestions. Develop a plan of action for the college or university administrators responsible with the recommended actions to eliminate the limitations that are vital to the institution's smooth flow of educational services. Your plan of

action should clarify why the execution of the plan is imperative. The objectives of this case study are to give students an opportunity to apply their knowledge of concepts of outsourcing into practice and foster critical thinking skills through an exploratory evaluation of outsourcing practices in a real-world situation, examine problems associated with implementation of outsourcing strategies, identify alternative outsourcing solutions, expand selection criteria, understand ethical, cultural, financial, human resource and legal issues involved in outsourcing strategies, build up team-based decision making skills and advance students' communication skills in terms of developing a plan of action and doing an oral presentation in class on their research findings.

Based on the knowledge of outsourcing learnt in class, prepare a report identifying the benefits and limitations of outsourcing in a higher education institution (college/university) and give your recommendations to overcome limitations

In class, your professor will discuss various concepts of outsourcing and strategies used by institutions of higher education in outsourcing their functions and services. The contemporary trend is to outsource non-instructional services and functions. College or university administrators determine the nature and extent of outsourcing their functions and services and they have to explore a number of issues and questions when deciding whether to outsource any service and or function. Following the class discussion, your professor will prepare a list of potential functions and services that can be outsourced. You can use the list as a guide to your study and you can modify the list to accommodate any specific services and functions outsourced by your client. Your professor will also discuss the benefits and limitations of outsourcing in higher education. Using the knowledge you gain from the class discussion as a guide, complete the following requirements.

1. Identify the functions and or services outsourced by your client university, both instructional and non-instructional.
2. Observe the procedure of outsourcing by your client.
3. Find out the motivations and/or goals of outsourcing those functions and or services by your client.
4. Find out to what extent the college or university administrators are satisfied with the level of outsourcing in the functional areas.
5. Find out the benefits gained from outsourcing by your client.
6. Observe the greatest concerns (limitations) for college or university administrators about outsourcing their functions and services.
7. Find out to what extent the employees were affected by your client's outsourcing decision/s.
8. Find out the cultural, legal and management control implications of outsourcing.
9. Find out to what extent the college or university administrators feel that the use of outsourcing will increase or decrease in their college/ university in the next five years.
10. Develop a plan of action. For any limitation of the functions and/or services outsourced by your client that needs to be corrected, describe the importance of eliminating that limitation. Recognize key issues and give your recommendations for overcoming the limitation. Propose possible alternative solutions and present steps to be followed, for the best alternative. List possible benefits and limitations for each alternative. It is important to note that the college/university administrators have the option of accepting or rejecting your recommendations based on the cost-benefit-trade-off and other strategic related concerns. Always use formal business language in your plan of action.

Once your group makes arrangements to meet with the relevant college/university administrators, mail a letter to thank them for meeting with you.

Case overview and learning objectives

Learning and teaching of outsourcing can be achieved through a number of approaches including lectures, presentations, readings, discussions, audio and video presentations, electronic learning, role-play, and case studies. These approaches provide students with different learning skills. Some approaches are designed to improve students' critical thinking and communications skills. A course that uses different teaching techniques can enhance students' learning and enrich classroom experience [Kiger and Rose, 2004]. In contemporary business environment, exposing business students to real-world business situations has become more important than ever. Business educators and researchers agree that there is an urgent need for a change in focus of management education. It is widely accepted that students be exposed to the real world scenarios as part of their college education experience. Similarly, business students are supposed to gain advanced skills in problem-solving, ethical considerations, group decision making, oral and written communication, and critical thinking. Many business courses emphasize the importance of those learning objectives and include different components of learning that assure the achievement of those learning objectives, as businesses prefer graduates with those skills.

Case studies give students an opportunity to deal with problems in real-world environments and they enhance students' skills in critical thinking, ethical considerations, group decision-making and communications. Case studies require self-discovery by students and applying theoretical knowledge into practice. Case based learning includes discovering problems or issues faced by business managers in business operations and developing alternative courses of actions or solutions. Similarly, case based learning is normally focused on the process rather than the end result and as a result, students can develop necessary skills to address similar issues or problems. As Yin [2, p.2] explained:

As a research endeavor, the case study contributes uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organizational, social, and political phenomena. ... In all of these situations, the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries.

Therefore, case studies are ideal in gaining important insight of outsourcing practices in institutions of higher education. The teaching case illustrated in this paper identifies the importance of using alternative methods of learning and teaching in management education. It assists students learn relevant outsourcing issues in a college/university and interacts with college/university administrators who make important strategic and operational decisions. It further boosts students' communications, critical thinking and analytical skills, as students are required to develop a plan of action about their observations and suggestions and do an oral presentation in the class.

Students are advised to be familiar with the popular literature on outsourcing to improve their understanding of the subject. The project provides students with an opportunity to perform team-based learning, which will enhance their skills in conflict resolution, negotiation and group decision-making. Studying a real world organization gives students an ability to work with real problems and the case will offer students with improved confidence in their ability to apply knowledge of outsourcing in the workplace.

Guidelines for the instructor

This case may be assigned as a major assignment in a course of management control/management accounting/operations management both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Students who are new to the case study method may feel discouraged and uncomfortable with the assignment. Thus, it is advisable to give students an introduction to the case study method. An empirical case study on outsourcing would be ideal to provide students with basic knowledge of case study method and outsourcing. Once the students are familiar with the case study method, the instructor can use the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1 to guide students in conducting the case study and developing a plan of action.

Outsourcing case model

The model illustrated in Figure 1 provides a framework for conducting the proposed case study and it has five steps:

- (a) Develop case objectives;
- (b) Perform analysis of functions and services outsourced;
- (c) Determine benefits of outsourcing;
- (d) Observe limitations of outsourcing;
- (e) Develop a plan of action.

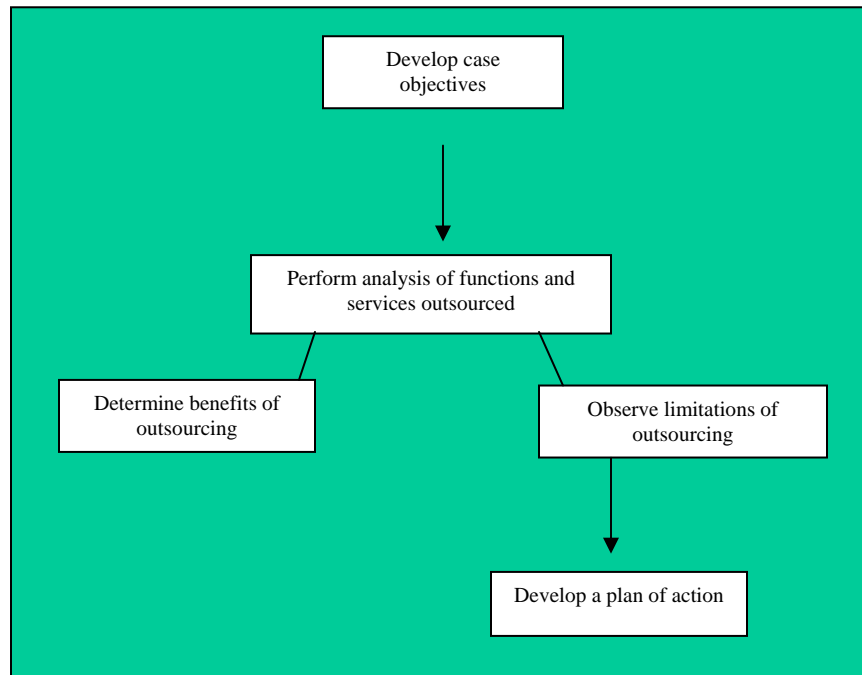
The instructor, however, may add or modify the above steps and may determine any specific requirements in conducting the case study and or developing the plan of action. For example, the instructor may wish to specify the format of the plan of action. Once the analysis of the institution's outsourcing is completed, a comprehensive plan of action should be developed for the use of the institution administrators. As pointed out in a later section, this case study can provide valuable guidance to institution administrators in recognizing the benefits of outsourcing and eliminating limitations of outsourcing. This will be useful in future outsourcing decisions.

a) Develop case objectives

As explained earlier, the objective of this case research is to examine the nature of outsourcing in an institution of higher education (a college/university). It is expected to provide information on the benefits and limitations of outsourcing, the processes involved in implementing outsourcing, the reasons given by college/university administrators for outsourcing, and the possible alternative solutions for eliminating limitations of outsourcing. The research will facilitate college/university administrators in developing future outsourcing strategies as it evaluates the existing procedures of outsourcing in the institution. The instructor may wish to add any specific goals and objectives to the research project as necessary to achieve specific learning goals and outcomes.

b) Perform analysis of functions and services outsourced

Through this case study students are expected to evaluate the process of outsourcing within a college/university and develop a plan of action to overcome any observed limitations of outsourcing. Students should use the knowledge of outsourcing in higher education they have gained from a formal course of outsourcing. The case will give students an opportunity to apply theoretical ideas of outsourcing they have learnt into practice. Practice will help students develop their analytical skills and improve problem-solving skills enabling them to deal with similar situations in their work place. The instructor may include any specific areas of outsourcing in higher education to be explored and the following can be used as a guide in giving your students an understanding of outsourcing higher education. Students should be advised to gain more information on real world examples of outsourcing in higher education, which is commonly available in the media.

Figure 1: Outsourcing Case Model

Defining Outsourcing in Higher Education

Outsourcing, which is also known as contracting out, is concerned with an institution's decision to contracting with an outside party to provide a service rather than providing the service itself. In the past, higher education institutions have outsourced the operation of bookstores, dining services and grounds and maintenance services to private vendors. At present, however, many other support services such as mail services, health services, residence halls, computing and information technology, teaching hospitals, ventilating and air conditioning maintenance, building and grounds management, childcare, fundraising, laundry services, printing, security, and car parking are also being contracted out. According to (Agron, 2002), the most popular outsourced services by colleges and universities are food services (74.6%), vending (63.2%), bookstore operations (45.7%), custodial services (45%), maintenance (35.9%), security (24.2%), and laundry services (20.6%). It is important to note that the services outsourced by many institutions are support services of higher education and they do not relate directly to providing instruction—the “core competency” of the institution. The recent financial pressures have led many colleges and universities to outsource additional services and functions such as facility management, administrative services such as payroll, transportation, healthcare, and many more (Wood, 2000).

An important consideration of outsourcing in higher education is to recognize services and functions that can be carried out independently from the core activities of the university. Core activities are what make the college/university unique or are most important to achieve its missions and goals. The distinction between core activities and support services should clearly be recognized, as some universities are outsourcing certain education programs too. Also, many consider student residence hall as a core service but George Mason University decided to outsource the management of a student residence hall (Mercer, 1995). Some universities have outsourced their library services and information technology instruction.

Interest in Outsourcing in Higher Education

Colleges and universities operate in highly competitive environments and market forces play a significant role in their business practices and decisions. Higher education consumers; students and parents, have many options open for them and can and will go elsewhere if they are dissatisfied with educational programs or their cost. For many decades, North American colleges and universities were able to easily and comfortably provide the quality education through financial help and support from various sources such as public funds, state grants, funding for research, funds from private organizations, and alumni. In recent years, however, a slow economy, declining students' enrollments, state budget cuts, reduced funding for research, and rapidly increasing costs of higher education have led many colleges and universities into tremendous financial hardships. College/ university tuition is radically increasing while the quality of services and teaching offered many colleges and universities are on the edge. Increasing competition and budgetary pressures have tempted administrators to improve efficiency and performance of colleges and universities. To rectify this situation and to stay competitive and improve services, colleges and universities have adopted a variety of popular management approaches in recent years, including outsourcing.

Outsourcing is a form of privatization in which a college/university contracts with an external party to provide a service or function. Managing support services is not the primary mission of higher education. Outsourcing support services allows a college or university to focus on its primary mission; teaching and research. Outsourcing proposes that if a college or university is unable to provide a service at less cost than, and of equal quality to, an outside party, then it should purchase the service from the outside party to minimize costs. Colleges and universities throughout North America are increasingly outsourcing more and more of their support service in an effort to reduce costs, increase service efficiencies, and boost income.

c) Determine benefits of outsourcing

Through the empirical analysis of outsourcing practices of the college/university, students should recognize the benefits of outsourcing. Students should identify the specific goals and motives of outsourcing, actions taken to achieve those goals and benefits gained by the college or university from outsourcing. Figure 2 lists some common goals and motivation for outsourcing in higher education.

Figure 2: Goals of Outsourcing in Higher Education

- Cost savings and budgetary constraints;
- Lack of capability/skilled workers to provide service;
- Product and Market planning and research and development;
- Safety concerns or liability of service;
- Mandated by governing body; and
- Pressure from peer institutions doing it.

Source: Gupta et al, 2005

Proponents of outsourcing argue that the specialist outside service providers can provide support services more efficiently and at lower cost than colleges and universities. They explain that outsourcing to an outside service provider can reduce a college's or university's labor and benefits costs, provide a single point of accountability, and provide predictable costs and the resulting savings allows the institution to focus more resources on its core operations; teaching and research (Ender and Mooney, 1994). Outsourcing will also enable a college/university to gain

better control over support services. Through the contract, administrators can more directly link remuneration with quality and completion of the task performed by the outside party. When entering into a contract, administrators have to clearly recognize the expectations of outsourcing. Administrators have to evaluate the end results with the expectations in doing payments and this will lead to better management of support services. Individual colleges and universities may achieve specific benefits of outsourcing and some identifiable benefits associated with outsourcing are shown in Figure 3. Students should clearly identify the benefits gained by their client from outsourcing.

Figure 3: Benefits Associated with Outsourcing

- **Added expertise:** Contracts may be structured so that vendors bear the cost of acquiring new equipment and technology. In the same way, the institution can bring new levels of expertise onto campus. An institution can, in fact, gain access to higher-level capabilities in a variety of domains without having to hire personnel.
- **Economies of scale:** Institutions can take advantage of economies of scale achieved by vendors. Specifically, private vendors specialize in a particular service area, allowing them to purchase goods or services at a lower cost.
- **Reduced costs:** Competition can be introduced into campus services that are often isolated from the profit factor. Managers are forced to find the most cost-effective means to provide a service to ensure that a profit is realized.
- **Risk avoidance:** Risks, such as liability issues, can be transferred to the service provider, allowing the contracting agency to share or avoid risks associated with providing a service.
- **Variable Staffing:** Contracting for seasonal work, such as lawn cutting and snow removal, can often be done on an as-needed basis. Using variable service contracts allows an institution to pay only for the services needed without incurring the overhead associated with hiring permanent staff.
- **Access to capital investment:** The ability to raise capital for facility renovations may be built into a contract. Often, a contractor will fund facility renovations as part of its bid to provide a campus service. This option can often allow a campus to offer a competitive service to the campus, such as a modern bookstore, that it might otherwise be unable to provide.

Source: <http://www.uwsa.edu/audit/outsourcing.doc>

Figure 4: Limitations of Outsourcing in Higher Education

- *Poor contract management:* Institutions often lack the expertise to properly structure or monitor contracts. For example, an institution may lack the expertise to ensure that a food service vendor is complying with the nutritional requirements specified by the contract.
- *Lower service quality:* Vendors may not understand the culture and mission of a campus, resulting in a different or lower standard of service quality.
- *Reduced collaboration:* Service providers may lack the interest necessary to participate in programming that is considered secondary to their mission. For example, food service providers may not be willing partners with the institution in providing late night hours or incorporating student programming if it affects their profit or cost control.
- *Loss of in-house expertise:* The ability of the institution to provide services in the future is diminished, as in-house expertise is lost.
- *Future cost increases:* The profit factor inherent with private enterprises often increases the cost of providing a service over time.
- *Loss of continuity:* Continuity of service may be jeopardized because of the transition between contractors, higher employee turnover, or contractor bankruptcies.

Source: <http://www.uwsa.edu/audit/outsourcing.doc>

d) Observe Limitations of Outsourcing

Like any other approach to management, outsourcing is not without its limitations. Students should identify the limitations of outsourcing faced by their client. Critics of outsourcing point out that private business practices are different from the established higher education traditions of shared governance and the academic profession, which requires substantial professional autonomy, peer rather than hierarchical authority, and a less materialistic culture (Johnstone). Another major limitation of outsourcing is its human resource consequences including lost jobs and reduced loyalty to the college/university. Jobs may be shifted from the college or university to the contractor performing the outsourced service or function, which may result in decreased salaries or benefits (Gilmer, 1997). Lost loyalty and disappointment with the reduced remuneration may result in poor performance by employees. Reduced service facilities by the contractor may result in poor teaching and learning environments such as uncomfortable and inadequate teaching facilities, shortages of textbooks in the bookstore, and lack of skilled technical staff to manage computer networks. Figure 4 exhibits some of the widely discussed limitations of outsourcing in higher education. Students should be instructed to recognize any other potential obstruction to outsourcing specific to their client institution. Some examples may include funding restrictions, collective bargaining agreements, and contract requirements, which may have an impact on their outsourcing decisions.

e) Develop a plan of action

Once students have recognized the benefits and key factors which impeded the outsourcing decision in their client institution, they should develop a plan of action to be used in future outsourcing decisions. In developing a plan of action, students should use the formal business language. The plan should give clear instructions and new insights to improve the existing benefits and to eliminate any limitations of outsourcing. The plan of action should include several alternative actions the college/university should take to eliminate the observed

limitations. It should give a full array of options and guidance to select the approach best suitable for the institution. Students should evaluate the proposed alternative actions in terms of their appropriateness, feasibility, and realism. It is important to expand the best alternative and present detailed steps that the relevant administrator/s should take in future outsourcing decisions. In developing the plan of action, students should point out the factors that their client-institution should address in order to guarantee a positive outcome from its future outsourcing decisions. When institutional administrators decide whether to outsource any service or function, they should consider a number factors relating to outsourcing decision. Rush, Kempner and Goldstein (1995) grouped these decision factors into six categories:

- Financial implications - the direct and indirect cost to the institution, which include the cost of the current system and those of all viable alternatives.
- Human resource implications- how employees will be affected, which considers training, hiring, compensation of the employees working in the functional area.
- Service quality implications - how each alternative affects the needs of the institution and its members.
- Mission and cultural implications - the effects of choosing an option inconsistent with the institution's stakeholders (students, faculty, staff and alumni).
- Managerial control and efficiency implications - the likely effect of options being considered on the institution's ability to control the direction and priorities of the service.
- Legal and ethical implications - the level of potential liability and risk that each option, tax ramifications, any potential conflicts of interest.

The relative importance of these decision factors will not be the same for each and every institution and among functional areas. Students should find out the importance of these factors for their institution and incorporate them in their plan of action. Similarly, there is no best model of outsourcing for services, however, there are a number of factors to be considered for any successful outsourcing decision. They are feasibility determination and comprehensive evaluation and planning of the contract. Contract management is vital for success in outsourcing. The institutional administrators should get feedback form the contractor, develop specific performance measures and monitor contract performance. Students should discuss these factors in their plan of action.

Some helpful hints to the instructor

It is important to assign this case study after introducing students to the case study learning. Drawing from the author's experiences listed below are some steps implementing this case. The instructor can specify any requirements regarding the formation of teams, management of them and time frame of administering the case and so on.

- a) We begin by giving a theoretical foundation of outsourcing in higher education. The need for exposure to empirical research in the field should also be emphasized. A good starting point is a discussion of the need for outsourcing in higher education and its popularity. This case can be administered to undergraduate students as a major assignment for their strategic cost management/ operations management/management control course. This can also be administered as an individual dissertation for graduate students. It is also possible to conduct the study as a comparative analysis of two institutions. Students should not be asked to visit their chosen client until they get a clear understanding of outsourcing in higher education and case study learning. This may take two weeks of class sessions.

- b) Students are encouraged to read in the text and become familiar with implications of outsourcing in higher education. They should be directed to read published materials on empirical work in outsourcing in higher education.
- c) It is important to introduce the “team” concept by the end of the second week. Students should be guided to find their teammates. Teams should be limited to 3-4 participants. As students may not be familiar with each other, one easy way of breaking the ice is to invite students to introduce themselves. The instructor should give instructions to students to record their meeting times with their teammates and with the relevant institution administrator/s. From time to time, the instructor may review the progress of the students’ work and the team behavior.
- d) The instructor may decide the timeline of the implementation of the case. Some students may need more time to find a client and complete the case. Making preparations to meet with group members and the scheduling with institution administrators will require sufficient lead time and the instructor should carefully schedule for deadlines for each step of the case implementation process. Clear instructions should be given on the preparation of the plan of action and its format.

This teaching case has several benefits to the instructor. First, the time to get ready and implement the case is minimal and the cost to use the case is low. Some theoretical and practical implications are given in the case regarding outsourcing in higher education. The instructor can follow them as a guide or use any other suitable theoretical implications to give students an understanding of outsourcing in higher education. A case research is often challenging for students because they are exposed to less structured problems and situations. Therefore, giving students enough guidance and examples of similar cases will help them overcome some barriers.

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