

The Frontiers of Business Leadership: Alberta Leading Change

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One of the great challenges of the 21st century is learning how to better support and rebuild societies damaged by decades of conflict or stagnating development, growing our worldwide economy. Efforts of development economists and aid organizations have not been particularly successful in frontier economies, where almost 20% people live on less than \$2 a day, amidst declining economic conditions and increased violence. Business innovations have been slow to reach these markets, as the risks and returns are vastly different than those in the developed world. Different business practices to address the challenges of frontier markets, such as insecurity security and corruption. Meanwhile, it is these economies who offer immense opportunities for growth in industries like technology, packaged goods, industrial, and even finance. In order to remain relevant and effective, preparing students to work in these environments is a vital component of a comprehensive and rigorous MBA curriculum (Pettigrew, 2001; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011).

MBA graduates working in these contexts must also be aware of the potential consequences of their activities in frontier markets. Examples abound that demonstrate the potential pitfalls of foreign-led economic activity in developing economies, which include decreased domestic production (Aitken & Harrison, 1999), increasing poverty (Stinger, 2006), environmental damage (Sharistava, 1995), and even increasing conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). In order to thrive, businesses in emerging economies must proactively manage the impact of their presence on existing social, environmental and cultural institutions (Hart, 1997). Thus, MBA candidates must learn, not only how to conduct business in frontier economies, but how to do it while maximizing the positive impact and minimizing the negative impact on the local social and natural environment.

The objective of the Frontiers of Business Initiatives course is to create an *innovative* transformational journey of discovery for students outside of the standard MBA curriculum. This course is based on a pedagogy of experiential service learning, which occurs in real-world contexts where the basic assumptions of theories can be questioned (Kolb, 1984), and social value is generated for partners that also broadens students' world view (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Godfrey et al., 2005). True service learning has proved difficult achieve at universities and specifically in business schools (Yorio & Yee, 2012). Across disciplines, half of the courses described as service learning did not substantively focus on partner outcomes (Papamarcos, 2005), and in a meta-analysis of 40 quantitative studies of true service learning courses, only five were housed in business schools (Yorio & Yee, 2012). Service learning in business curriculum is essential in professionalizing an ethical business climate (Godfrey, 1999; Jacoby, 1996).

Leading at the Frontiers of Business is an *innovative* course that achieves service-learning by *collaborating* with partner organizations on business and development-related projects in frontier economies. This course will allow students to engage in outside of the traditional business domain to begin understand the unique challenges of doing business in complex environments. Immersion in the field will not be easy. *Collaborating* with humanitarian and business partners requires a new vocabulary, deep cultural sensitivity and challenging team building. Students will face the real possibility of failure in their projects as they face the stark realities of poverty and insecurity. This immersive experience not only builds skills but also instills an abiding sense of service in our students (Kentworthy-U'Ren & Peterson, 2005). A pilot of the Frontiers of Business Initiative course is already underway. Currently a team of nine MBA students, mentored by Dr. Emily Block and Dr. Michael Maier¹, are partnering with Dr. Melaku Game from the University of Alberta Hospital and a collection of eight sub-Saharan African governments (IGAD) to develop a business plan for a regional cancer care center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We will spend January 2017 in Ethiopia, investigating the realities of the supply chain for equipment and pharmaceuticals, the challenges of retaining top medical professionals, and the difficult realities of world-class patient care under amongst unstable political, social and economic conditions. This pilot course exists due to the commitment of the administration of Alberta School of Business who believe that our school is where world changing *innovations* are born².

We also believe that this initiative plays well into the new “For the Public Good” ISP, particularly Objective 7 (Increase graduate access to and participation in a broad range of curricular experiential learning opportunities that are well-integrated with program goals and enrich their academic experience), Objective 14 (Inspire, model, and support excellence in teaching and learning.), Objective 18 (Seek, build, strengthen, and sustain partnerships with local, national, or international research agencies, governments, government ministries and agencies, universities, Indigenous communities, libraries, not-for-profits, industry, business, and community organizations.), and Objective 20 (Continue to build and support an integrated approach to social, economic, and environmental sustainability that incorporates teaching and learning, research, outreach, capacity building, and the operations that support them).

The Course: Frontiers of Business Initiative: We propose the development of a selective, advanced MBA elective course that matches teams of students with local partner organizations in frontier economies to collaborate on projects where the partner either lacks expertise or resources. Interested students will apply for the fall semester course in the previous spring, and will be given reading assignments over the summer to begin to broaden their understanding of the economic, social, political and cultural contexts in which they will be operating (see Appendix A). The formal course work will commence in the fall semester where students will attend weekly class dedicated to discussions around assigned readings from law, economics, political science and international relations coupled with their accumulated business skills and experience

¹ Dr. Maier and Dr. Block are donating their time during the pilot. We have obtained approval for Dr. Block to teach this course on load in Fall 2017.

² This course builds upon a legacy of success that Dr. Block brings from her previous position at the University of Notre Dame. From 2008-2016, we served 6 non-governmental organizations and the US Army Special operations command, on 30 global projects related to youth unemployment, reconciliation, human trafficking and environmental disaster preparedness. This course was recognized by Forbes Magazine as one of the 10 most innovative MBA courses.

in order to understand how business principles can provide *innovative* solutions to complex development challenges (see Appendix B). Students will learn about data collection strategies, ethical research practices, cultural sensitivities and emergency procedures as a part of this comprehensive curriculum. The course materials will provide a foundation for the service-learning projects, which students will co-produce with partner organizations. Students will have weekly meetings with their partners over Skype to collectively develop a scope of work that details the hypotheses to be tested through interviews and third party data collection. Before departure to the country, the team will deliver a white paper of best practices.

During reading week, students will travel to work side by side with their partners in country. This is a truly immersive experience, that will ask students to step beyond their comfort zones and deeply experience the stark realities of impoverished communities. Rather than simply conducting formal interviews with business leaders, students will actually participate in business activities in order to understand the needs and constraints of the proposed plan. In previous projects, students and faculty spent days working as informal trash workers in order to test their assumptions and develop business models that are contextually driven and feasible. These experiences are essential in providing value to our partners as they allow students to identify and overcome hidden problems. For example, in Timor-Leste, an initial project scope sought to understand the under productivity of land and overreliance on expensive imported food. Our initial models were focused on water, transportation and agricultural technology. However, after spending a week living and farming with a family in a small village, we observed what was missing; the farmers themselves. After years of war, families, eager to educate their children in the city, were left only with young girls and the elderly to tend the fields. From this insight our final deliverable was not focused on irrigation, but rather a program that encouraged agricultural internships for university students.

Behind the Scenes: Cultivating Collaborative Partnerships: A great deal of work is required to coordinate an effort of this size. Appropriate project and partner identification and development is critical to facilitate effective service-learning. Whenever possible, new partnerships should be vetted in person, in order to build trust, identify opportunities and ensure that project ambitions are in line with partner capabilities. Dr. Block has produced scholarly work that outlines this sensitive process (Block & Bartkus, 2016). Over the first three years of the proposed program, our aim is to cultivate five new partners, to provide a sustainable foundation for Frontiers. This will be accomplished in several ways. First, the U of A will serve as a source for potential interdisciplinary partners. Examples of aspirational partners include the Peter Lougheed Leadership College, the International Capacity Development Programs and the Centre for Global Citizenship Education and Research with programs across Africa and South America. We hope to use the next several years to build interdisciplinary connections between the Alberta School of Business and other faculties. Second, there are opportunities to leverage previous partnerships, including those with Mercy Corps International and World Vision. Third, as we leverage our dissemination plan, we hope to build momentum that cultivates relationships across the University, using the Centre for Teaching and Learning, as well as the Edmonton community. Finally, an important element of the partnership development will be project follow up, measurement and evaluation to ensure satisfaction and ways to improve our future collaborations. Each project will re-

ceive a formal follow up 3 months, 6 months and one year after project completion, which is outlined and expected for students and faculty on the project team. We believe this again will strongly align with the University of Alberta “For the Public Good” Strategic Plan.

Dissemination Plan: The University, Alberta and Beyond: The communication and dissemination of the Frontiers mission and the results of our specific projects is an important component of our partnership development and awareness strategy. We have already begun working with the Alberta School of Business communications staff and magazine writers with the goal of raising awareness of Frontiers. Initially, this strategy will be targeted at first year and perspective MBA students to differentiate the Alberta MBA from its competitors. Students currently enrolled in the course are developing an initial brand and social media presence. Upon completion of the project, enrolled students will conduct a “road show,” presenting our work to our current and future partners, the Alberta School of Business and the University at large in venues such as the Center for Teaching and Learning. Concurrently, we will continue to present our experiences with these projects at professional academic conferences. Dr. Block has participated in professional development workshops at the Academy of Management Conference in the last 3 years focusing on the design and implementation of service-learning courses. We will continue to pursue a research program around this approach to service-learning, and continue to advocate for experiential learning that provides substantive value to partners.

Program Success: Program success will be measured in several ways. First and foremost, successful projects will be conducted safely. Second, our program will be successful if our students are able to shift their mindset through tackling some of the toughest global challenges. Third, our partners’ outcomes will greatly determine the success of our program. In contrast with experiential learning courses that emphasize student experiences, at Frontiers, we seek to provide sustained, long term value to our partners. This value can be measured in a variety of ways, not only through specifically achieving project milestones, examining factors such as jobs created and increases in livelihoods, but also providing partners the chance to test potential ideas, fail fast and acquire new skills and perspectives. Finally, we will continue to track project success over time, paying close attention to local economic conditions across the communities we serve. Over time, my ambitions for this program will be to branch into research, connecting our partners to scholars across the University and providing a venue for collaborative interdisciplinary research.

Program Sustainability: If we were to successfully receive the TLEF grant, we would use the award to build a foundation for subsequent program growth in the following ways. First, it would allow us to accumulate a track record of successful project outcomes. This will allow us to secure additional funding³ and solidify our position in the MBA curriculum. We hope to use the TLEF grant to build the partnerships, projects and experiences to garner support of faculty, students and alumni to ensure that this course successfully passes this milestone. Second, once this course is established and its value to students is proven, students will be asked to contribute financially to their expenses, as is the tradition in other courses that involve travel. The proposed expenses would allow for Frontiers to support student travel as we build this reputation for value.

³ This year, we are conducting the pilot course with nine students and a budget of \$50,000 for air travel, ground transportation, security and insurance. For this pilot, there were no partner development activities and our partner that we chose was able to donate \$20,000 to our costs. Over time, Frontiers hopes to be self-sustaining and able to serve a variety of partner organizations. We are currently exploring potential partnerships with Newmont Mining in Ghana and a number of Indonesian anti- (human) trafficking organizations as potential partners for next year.

Finally, the Business Frontiers Initiative has the potential to draw support from alumni and other donors looking to fund *innovative* programming in the Alberta School of Business. We are already working with the development staff in the Dean's office to create materials and target key donors for support. The financial support from this TLEF would allow sufficient time to cultivate these donor relationships.

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