LEARNING AT THE DARDEN SCHOOL

The Darden School has developed a unique approach to achieving educational objectives in its longer management education programs. The foundations of this approach lie in (1) how the programs are structured and (2) teaching methods used in the classroom. The primary purpose of this note is to introduce you to the teaching methods, but that discussion will mean more to you after a brief description of how we structure the program you are attending.

Each management program is designed by the faculty to be a carefully integrated educational experience oriented toward specific objectives. Each course within the program has the primary responsibility of serving the program objectives while at the same time achieving its own course objectives. Instructors design their courses with an eye to both program and course objectives and to the optimum sequence for coverage of their material. The program aspects are then built in by integrating the courses with one another, with particular attention to serving program objectives, coverage, duplication, reinforcement, and cross-course application. In effect, the structuring of our programs follows a matrix approach to assure that courses are in tune with each other and with the program. The planning and development process ensures a highly integrated and synergistic program. Such programs are dynamic and flexible; they are honed both during and between program offerings in order to adjust to new groups of participants and the ever-changing environment.

The pedagogy of The Darden School is a blend of many instructional approaches. We use most of the conventional methods of instruction with which you are familiar, such as readings, texts, lectures, seminar and class discussions, films, and written papers. We make much more use, however, of methods you may not have experienced, such as cases, group experiences, role plays and simulations, and group projects and presentations. Whereas conventional methods, primarily lectures, are based on one-way communication, instructor to student, the latter methods are more interactive; that is, they use more two-way communication among students and instructors. Although there is certainly a place for traditional methods, our faculty favors a more interactive mode for management education.

The rationale behind this interaction is our belief that most people who wish to advance in management learn most effectively through thought-provoking experiences. Our pedagogy attempts to provide the most relevant experiences possible to form the basis for more effective managerial
performance and to lead you through commitment and debate to true involvement in the learning experience. We do not ignore giving pure information and technique when necessary, but we are more concerned with your use of knowledge. It is in the area of “guided experience” that our methodology is so important; we give you the most realistic experience possible in the classroom, and we tailor this experience to your needs.

Our principal pedagogical tool is the case method. Because many of you have not experienced this method (particularly as it is used here), we will briefly describe what is involved in its use and how it ties in with our ideas on learning.

Simply stated, the case method calls for discussion of real-life situations that business executives have faced. These situations have been written as “cases” by case writers who have sought, as good reporters, to present all the information available to the business executives concerned. Some of the cases are set in companies you will recognize by name; others are disguised. In either event the situations are real.

In our programs, you will have three general types of cases. One type can be classified as evaluation cases. This type of case describes what a company has done, and the principal purpose of the class discussion is to evaluate the soundness of what the company’s management did. A second type of case is commonly known as a problem/decision case; that is, management faces a specific problem, and the situation calls for the consideration of alternative actions, a decision, and a plan of action. Finally, there is the general appraisal type of case, wherein information is given, but the information is unstructured—and, therefore, it is up to the participants to determine how things are going (evaluation), whether there are problems calling for action, and if so, what action to take. Most of the cases we deal with are problem/decision cases.

The case method first calls for you individually to read and think carefully about each case. You must identify problems, define alternatives, analyze data, make a decision, and outline a course of action. Normally, to do this well you must assume for yourself a management role in the company.

The process of arriving at your own personal position on each case is the most important aspect of the program. If you clearly take a position in your own mind, then you will be personally involved in the discussions and intensely interested. On the other hand, if you simply read a case and remain neutral about it, you are unlikely to be affected or to learn. We emphasize involved learning.

The discussion of the case first takes place in informal small groups (called study or discussion groups) and then in a regularly scheduled class meeting, where, with the help of an instructor, the collective views, opinions, and judgments of everyone in the class are thoroughly explored. The principal objective of these discussions is to explore all aspects of the case situation: facts, suppositions, alternatives, final action. Undoubtedly, you will find these discussions highly exciting and covering a wide range of topics, subjects, views, and so forth. In these sessions, the instructor’s goal is first to obtain individual views and next to help pull together the prevailing views of the discussion. His or her mission is not to say what or who is right or wrong. The instructor is
charged with ensuring that all in the class, instructor and participant alike, have a common experience on which to build personalized generalizations and understandings about management.

The effective management of a business essentially involves the adjustment of the resources of a firm (human, financial, production, and marketing) to the changing character of the environment, rather than the application of “knowledge” about what works and does not work in particular situations. Accordingly, the focus of our discussions is on analysis and decision-making: what are the facts, what do they mean, what alternatives are available, and what specifically should be done, how and when? Our cumulative experience in the program through cases, projects, exercises, and so forth, coupled with the wealth of experience we and you bring to the program, will become ordered as we make progress with the development of our own personal conceptual schemes and generalizations. As this process occurs, we will become more proficient in recognizing and dealing with opportunities and problems. We will also find that some of our attitudes have changed and that we have adopted some new ideas that previously were foreign to our thinking.

During and after such a learning experience, cataloging “what I learned” is difficult, because the emphasis is on developing skills, conceptual approaches, and attitudes, and only secondarily on knowledge. Don’t let this bother you; remember that you are rewarded for your use of knowledge, not for its possession. Acquiring knowledge is the continuous responsibility of the manager whether in school or out, and it is the easiest (but generally neglected) part of the manager’s job. Our teaching approach will increase your thirst for knowledge, but also make you respect its use.

Darden faculty members have learned that we can anticipate several common reactions to the case method in the days ahead, so it may be helpful here to anticipate and comment on them. First, because one objective of the case method is to obtain all the views of all the participants in the case discussion, a wide variety of views does emerge. A frequent criticism by some participants, however, is that some of the remarks made are not especially useful, if not irrelevant. From experience, we suggest that comprehensive discussion must entertain a wide variety of ideas, lest some really good ideas be lost, and further, that wide-ranging discussions down the wrong path may sometimes be more rewarding than narrow trips down the so-called “right path.” Second, the purpose or task of the instructor is not to direct the discussions along predetermined avenues, but rather to elicit all the views, opinions, and recommendations that can be obtained. Hence, where the discussions go and where they lead is the collective responsibility of the group, not of the instructor alone.

A typical request at the end of a case discussion is: What is the answer? Let us emphasize here that our methods of learning do not provide “the” answer; they are intended to provide the basis for good answers and the ability to identify problems and opportunities. Frequently, several good “answers” will be developed and supported by various segments within the class. The objective of the case method has then been attained: individuals have evolved well-formulated positions regarding what they would do. After that, you will find that instructors may or may not suggest the pros and cons of various alternative actions, tell what actually happened, and so on. The point is that what actually happened or what any one person thought ought to have been done is of no importance; what is significant is that you know what you would do in that specific situation. And
more importantly, you are incorporating that experience with other experiences, digesting it and ordering it in such a way that you are better equipped to handle the next problem that comes along.

It should be evident at this point why our interactive pedagogy and highly structured program approaches go hand in hand. We need the structured program to ensure that the experiences you are exposed to will provide the maximum opportunity to learn. Because learning in the area of administration is complex, cutting across functional areas and involving so many human and environmental considerations, we must pay close attention to the construction of our “matrix of experiences.” Our experience with this unique approach to learning emphatically tells us that it is worth the effort in rewards to student and instructor alike.

Our methodology is not without its frustrations. Responsibility for learning rests with the student, and real learning comes hard, even painfully. But real learning is the most rewarding, the most stimulating, when it is yours, and such learning will stay with you. Easy learning—usually the one-way transmission of fact, technique, or someone else’s warmed-over generalizations—is usually a come-and-go affair; it may be easy to sit through, but it tends to be left in the classroom or in the pages of dusty notebooks.

Let us close this note with a quote from Balzac that highlights our philosophy and approach: “So he had grown rich at last, and thought to transmit to his only son all the cut-and-dried experience which he himself had purchased at the price of his lost illusions; a noble last illusion of age...”

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1 As quoted by Charles I. Gragg in Because Wisdom Can’t be Told.