

# Graduate Affairs

## MBA CANDIDATES KEEPING IT REAL IN THEIR CAPSTONE COURSE



By Amy Timmes and  
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What makes the Stillman MBA Integrative II Business Consulting course unique? It is an opportunity for graduate students to apply all they have learned during their MBA program to a real-world client. This year's record-setting class had a choice of three local establishments: Fleetwash, an \$80+ million truck washing business founded by two Seton Hall alumni, with operations from coast to coast; the world renowned nonprofit Teach for America NJ, headed by a Stillman alumna; and Priddy Learning Academy, a well-respected after-school tutoring program that aims to unlock students' learning potential. All of these clients are well-established, successful organizations looking to stay competitive in a rapidly changing world.

"It's exciting," noted Nicholas Gomes Benatti, a graduate student planning to complete the MBA program in May. "This is hands down the best project I've worked on here at Seton Hall, if not my entire college career. I really like the opportunity to take on a real problem and have the ability to drive a solution. This is a fantastic approach to the capstone!"

"The student teams have representatives from multiple MBA concentrations, which enables them to view the client's situation from multiple perspectives," said Associate Professor Dr. McCrea, the course instructor. "These clients are running their organizations nearly 24/7 and dealing with day-to-day issues. They are in the weeds, so to speak. The students can take a step back and see the big picture. They can see what potential threats or opportunities may be on the horizon and make concrete recommendations to the clients. The students' advice can have a tangible impact going forward," she continued.

Brad Childs, an automotive industry consultant and Stillman MBA alumnus, who serves as the course Practice Partner, agreed. "It's fascinating to watch the students engage with the client and then interact within their teams to develop real strategies. We have three very diverse clients this semester, yet the core principles of strategy development shine through in each."

The hands-on nature is important. "This course allows students to apply all of their learning throughout the MBA into this one culminating project, Childs emphasized. "It's a great experience because it reminds the students that what they learned throughout the program is very applicable to real-world companies. It is not ivory tower, academic stuff," he added. "In addition, what the students learn during these projects—about business, about teamwork, about persuasive presentations, and so on—can be directly transferred to their current and future jobs."

Another unique feature of the course is the use of "coaches" who meet informally with the student teams periodically throughout the semester. "Just like a soccer coach or a football coach can help his or her players reach their full potential, the volunteer coaches share their business acumen with the MBA students," said McCrea. "They are experienced business professionals and they bring a lot to the table. They serve as sounding boards in the beginning stages, helping the students think through their client's complex and ambiguous situations. Then, later in the process, the coaches assist the teams in fine-tuning their recommendations and polishing their final presentations," she added. Most of the coaches are Seton Hall alumni and, in the words of Andy Chabak, an experienced consultant, Stillman MBA alumnus, and volunteer coach, they "bleed blue."

"It sounds clichéd, but it is definitely a win-win-win situation," McCrea noted. The first win is for the clients. "The clients get valuable insight about their organizations and the current business climate, as well as actionable recommendations they can implement immediately or down the road." Bobby Dukich, a client from last semester, noted that his firm, a niche financial software firm located in South Orange, "had a wonderful experience working with SHU on the Ferential project." They have already implemented some of the students' suggestions.

The second win is for the coaches. "I'm totally positive about my experience working with the students," said Chabak. The volunteer coaches get an opportunity to give back to Stillman, while experiencing the intense satisfaction of mentoring the next generation of business professionals. It is an excellent example of Seton Hall's servant leadership in action.

Finally, the third win is for the MBA students, because they get significant real-world experience and an opportunity to integrate all they have learned in the program. McCrea observed, "This is great for our working students; it gives them a view into another business and may help spark innovative ideas that they can then implement at their current employer. It is even more important for those students with limited job experience. The real-world project looks good on their resume and makes a great interview talking-point!"

In the end, students with MBA degrees from Stillman emerge with a unique, hands-on, real-world experience they can implement throughout their careers. Sean Mulhern ('16), currently working as an account executive for Yelp, said, "The Capstone Course at Stillman gave me hands on experience that has benefited me tremendously in my role at Yelp. Working directly with the client and using all the resources Stillman has to offer creates an applied learning opportunity that is truly second to none."

