






DEVELOPING WHAT CAN'T BE TAUGHT: CREATING AN EFFECTIVE PORTFOLIO OF STUDENT OUTCOMES THROUGH A STUDENT-RUN DIGITAL MARKETING AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide an extended case study of the development of and early outcomes of a student-run digital marketing agency. Employers are looking to hire graduates who are “work ready.” In the area of digital marketing, this is especially challenging given the rapid pace of change in the industry where new technologies, companies and business processes seem to be introduced on a weekly basis. To build a bridge between the undergraduate marketing curriculum and the practice of digital marketing, an AACSB-accredited business school in northern New England created a student-run digital marketing agency that functions within and alongside the marketing course structure. This required the development of an ecosystem to support the agency and provide the business school’s undergraduate students with an opportunity to work with real clients and industry professionals using the latest tools and techniques. Initially focusing on the application of hard skills of digital marketing and industry technologies, we found that equal or higher value and interest for our students were the soft skills and client interactions they developed as part of the agency experience.

Introduction

There is a growing awareness that students need new skills if they are to begin a career in digital marketing (Langan, Cowley, & Nguyen, 2019; Laverie, Humphrey, Manis, & Freberg, 2020; Schlee & Karns, 2017; Staton, 2016). This is a call that echoes what has been voiced from individuals working in the industry (Floyd & Gordon, 1998; McCale, 2008). There exists, however, a gap between what is taught in the marketing curriculum and what students need to know to enter a career in digital marketing (Zahay, Pollitte, Reavey, & Alvarado, 2022). Substantial evidence shows that employers want graduates with well-developed soft skills alongside the technical skills (Finley, 2023). The question is how to align this development within the marketing curriculum.

The appropriate strategy for bridging the gap between what industry wants and what the traditional marketing curriculum can provide is not so clear. One approach is to integrate “real world” digital marketing projects into the regular curriculum of digital marketing related courses. This provides students with a snapshot of how to work on a specific aspect of an organization’s digital marketing. This can be extended further by integrating digital marketing into and across all marketing courses (Zahay, Pollitte, Reavey, & Alvarado, 2022).

Another approach has been to rely on industry to provide the answer by requiring that students complete an industry certification as a required component in a digital marketing course (Humphrey, Laverie, & Muñoz, 2021; Schlee & Karns, 2017; Staton, 2016). Becoming certified in a particular technology platform can provide a needed foundation to engage in digital marketing and signal possible competency of a particular tool or technology (Cowley, Humphrey, & Muñoz, 2021). However, certifications alone are not the answer (Key, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2019; McCale, 2008). To understand the true opportunities and limitations of particular platform and for students to retain what they have learned, they must have an opportunity to put these tools and knowledge into practice (Crittenden & Peterson, 2019).

In this article, we discuss how a student-run digital marketing agency can be a critical element that contributes to the development of marketing students’ soft-skills. We created a student-run digital marketing agency, which we will reference in this publication as the Agency, to meet the need for a dynamic, applied learning environment. The Agency is part of an ecosystem that we will describe further in this article. The motivation behind creating the Agency is to provide a structured experience to strengthen students’

understanding of digital marketing tools and techniques, while providing them an immersive environment, that for all intents and purposes functions just like a commercial digital marketing agency, to hone their craft.

This research presents an extended case study of the development of the Agency and its supporting curricular ecosystem. While previous marketing pedagogical research has presented curriculum design ideas to improve the effectiveness of digital marketing learning objectives (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015; Zahay, Pollitte, Reavey, & Alvarado, 2022), our study examines the development and outcomes of a student-run digital marketing agency. First, we discuss the objectives of the Agency, examining the ability to produce hard and soft skills. Second, we review how the Agency fits within and alongside the marketing curriculum. Next, we provide an extended discussion of the Agency and its ecosystem, and then we present some preliminary results of how we track the value of the Agency in marketing education, examining both the hard skills and the soft skills. Finally, we present recommendations for best practices for developing a student-run digital marketing agency. In doing so, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Why are both hard and soft skills needed to prepare marketing students to work in the digital marketing field?

RQ2: What options exist within the marketing curriculum for experiential learning?

RQ3: How does the Agency align with the traditional marketing curriculum?

RQ4: What must be put in place for an Agency to contribute to the learning goals of a digital marketing curriculum?

RQ5: How might we track the value of the Agency?

Now in its fourth year, we have come to understand that the value of the Agency to the students is not limited the development of hard skills (e.g., SEO, analytics, content creation, social media planning, website building), but also in the soft skills (e.g., collaboration, leadership, problem-solving, interpersonal communication) that are built through the ongoing relationship with actual clients in a supportive team-based environment. Both the students who participate in the Agency and the employers who hire those students highly value the soft skills that have been developed as part of the

experience. Teamwork, effective communication, initiative, client interaction and a strong work ethic are all develop as part of the experience.

Hard Skills and Soft Skills

The development of soft skills requires a different type of learning environment that is quite distinct from those conventional practices designed to address the acquisition of knowledge. Hard skills often require the use of specific knowledge to perform a job-related task (Balcar, 2016). Universities for the most part are organized around academic departments that impart discipline-based knowledge. Mastering a body of knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge often falls under the heading of hard skills. Performance is reflected in the grades earned which then serve as a representation that the work needed to demonstrate successful mastery of a given set of ideas has been completed.

While what has been traditionally delivered by academics provides a fundamental base, employers are increasingly looking for soft skills along with hard skills. Problem solving, working in teams, and effective communication are often found at the top of most employer's lists. They are heavily influenced by personality traits that are often honed by one's life experiences. The most important traits are commonly referred to as the "Big Five" that include: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Goldberg, 1993).

As part of his Nobel prize winning work, James Heckman (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006) identified conscientiousness – the tendency to be organized, responsible, and hard-working – as the most widely predictive of the commonly used personality measures, predicting educational attainment, health, and market outcomes as strongly as measures of cognitive ability. Their observation is further supported by a meta-analysis of 62 studies which shows that there is a significant association between personal earnings and what is known as the big five personality traits. This association has been found to be statistically significant and positive for Openness, Conscientiousness, and Extraversion, while negative for Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Aiderotti, Chiara, & Traverso, 2023).

With respect to digital marketing, Elhajjar (2022) analyzed 320 job postings in 2019 and 2020 from LinkedIn and recruitment websites, counting the frequency certain terms that recruiters sought in a digital marketing candidate. The top 5 skills requested in order of frequency of mention are: 1]

Communication (ability to build-relationships and persuade internal and external partners), 2] Technical (ability to use standard digital tools); 3] Analytical (ability to problem solve and work across teams to achieve results); 4] Data and Analytics (able to work with real data); and 5] Creativity (ability to consider something in a new way).

It is important to note that three of the top five skills fall within the category of soft skills and align with the big five personality characteristics. A similar study using data from Hungary (Kovacs & Vamosi Zarandne, 2022) supports the importance of soft skills in advertisements for digital marketing jobs.

This addresses our first research question of how best to develop those requisite hard *and* soft skills that are most in demand by employers. With the appropriate incentives and learning environment, both hard and soft skills can be developed and refined over time. However, the conditions that foster the development of applicable skills in a digital marketing work environment are not necessarily well served by standard courses that focus more on the development of cognitive abilities than soft skills. These differences are denoted in Table 1.

A student-run agency does more than provide an opportunity to put knowledge into practice or a forum for honing a skill through repeated use. It provides that all-so-important context which leads to the development of decision-making – critical choices of how and when to implement a tactic or skill within a working environment. This builds confidence through a better understanding and familiarity with industry practices as well as from external validation of visible results. Through multiple interactions in a variety of contexts, the Agency provides a proving ground to better evaluate a future course of action.

Table 1. Teaching hard skills and soft skills – a Comparison.

	Hard Skills	Soft Skills
Abilities	Intelligence	Personality Traits
Background	Prior Education	Experiences
Goal	Mastery of Ideas	Mastery of Methods
Evaluation	Performance on Assessments	Performance on Tasks
Measures	Grades/Certifications	Achievements

Options for Experiential Learning in the Marketing Curriculum

Before focusing on the value of an Agency, and to address the second research question, it is important to identify the various options for injecting experiential learning into the marketing curriculum. As shown in Table 2, EdTech, with its ability to inexpensively scale, offers several options for infusing the “real world” into the curriculum. However, they are less effective at the development of those soft skills than the client-based options that are highly coveted by potential employers (Niman & Chagnon, 2023). Each of these opportunities for experiential learning is described further in this section.

Certifications

Certifications are appealing from the standpoint of providing additional signals of a student’s interest and proficiency in digital marketing. Often offered by those companies that are building the tech infrastructure that underlies digital marketing, they offer learning opportunities that help a student understand and utilize standard platforms such as HubSpot or Google to carry out basic tasks. They relieve the instructor from having to be adept at using the latest generation of tools and can help to build a bridge between theory and practice. Since each company is hoping that the next generation of digital marketers will use their tools, they invest heavily in making their educational offerings widely available to higher education at minimal cost. While gaining personal expertise at a “hard skill,” students are limited by the transferability of the knowledge beyond the provider’s software, and it provides limited opportunities to develop soft skills.

Micro-Internships

To better fulfill the career goals of the student population, EdTech providers are moving beyond programs that are essentially “training” modules that focus on the tools themselves and shifting to how they are applied in a particular job setting. Even traditional textbook

Table 2. Experiential learning options for the marketing curriculum.

Type	EDTECH				Client-Based	
	Certification	Micro-internship	Simulation	Project	Consultancy	Agency
Example	Hubspot	Forge	HBS	Riipen	Networks	Funnel
Integration	Minimal	Minimal	Low	Medium	N/A	N/A
Cost	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High
Revenues	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero	Sponsorship	Client Fees
VARIABLEITY	Low	Medium	Low	High	High	Medium
Soft Skills	Minimal	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High

publishers like Pearson are moving into this space with their recently announced partnership with Forage. Elements like micro-internships offer additional value that can be bundled into the price of the textbook. Similar to certifications, they are stand-alone opportunities that do not require much integration with a traditional curriculum, and instead serve the role as a value-add that may connect a particular subject to a specific real-world application. They are only as current as an employer is willing to invest in continuous improvement and updating, as digital marketing tools continue to swiftly evolve. They are mostly solo endeavors but offer the possibility for the student to receive valuable feedback from the employer.

Simulations

Simulations are familiar to many instructors, and they provide an opportunity for giving students a hands-on learning experience. Their strength is their reliability in providing students a consistent experience. As such, they require a substantial investment in both design and execution, and they are also expensive to update and often adhere to slower update cycles as industry norms change over time. A major limitation is that the students know it is a simulation and is not “real,” and this can impact their effort and decisions. Typically, they are an added expense as the student must purchase access to the simulation. Simulations also require significant time investments by the faculty who, to make the most of the learning experience, must more integrate it into the course curriculum. That being said, when the simulation is run in a collaborative team environment, more opportunities exist for soft skill development.

Projects

As an alternative to simulations, projects can be designed to last a major portion of the entire semester and give the student an opportunity to put ideas into practice. These projects are most effective when they are meant to meet the current needs of actual companies. The principal challenge here is sourcing potential partners, creating an appropriate scope of work, and aligning a deliverable that meets both company and curricular needs. Another challenge is variability of the learning experience, especially when there are multiple teams and projects.

To address some of these challenges, companies such as Riipen have entered the space by creating partnerships with companies that have projects suitable for a particular curriculum, including digital marketing. Subsidized by the project providers themselves, the

financial costs to an educational institution are minimal. However, the instructor may incur a greater burden, as projects need to be vetted and then integrated into the course in a manner that enhances existing learning objectives. In turn, suitable feedback must be provided, and students must have an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned by engaging in the project. Given that most projects are structured to focus on demonstrating hard skills, soft skills development is minimal as students are limited to a single project exposure and soft skills assessment, such as teamwork, is typically only measured in post-project peer reviews.

Consultancy

When client-based projects become the equivalent of consulting projects that extend to an entire semester, they encapsulate the course itself. Typically organized in a workshop format, students work in teams to put ideas into practice by addressing a client issue in an expanded project format. Learning how to engage in a collaborative team environment on an existing client case can promote the development of soft skills by offering students a realistic experience.

While the benefits can be substantial, so are the costs. Existing networks that exist in alumni relations, advancement, and career services are great starting points for cultivating potential clients. All of this imposes a substantial cost on the institution and instructor as the efforts of different groups must be coordinated to bring forward client projects that meet the learning goals of a particular course. Here, the more extensive a faculty member's or college's professional network of companies and alumni will ultimately determine how realistic it may be to create a course or club for academic credit that is built around a consulting relationship. Moreover, considerable ongoing faculty involvement is required. Clients must be managed. They must be reminded that there is an obligation to participating, one in which they have a responsibility to be attentive and constructive in the learning experience of the students, who have never worked with clients and are learning how best to manage these relationships. Yet, it is precisely this process of managing client relationships as project work is undertaken that in combination provide a superior opportunity for the development of soft skills. Similarly, this development is limited to what can be learned from working with a single client.

Agency

The benefits increase substantially when client projects are undertaken as part of a student-run agency.

Ongoing work that can span beyond a single semester, undergoing multiple iterations in response to real-time data, and performing multiple projects by different teams creates the most fertile environment for the development of soft skills. As the reputation of the agency grows, it is able to attract higher quality clients, which increases the robustness of the learning experiences and ensures that the overall experience of students can evolve in a similar way. As the reputation of the agency grows and is therefore able to attract higher quality clients, students are afforded a consistent higher quality experience.

Costs that are initially very high, steadily decline as the agency grows and develops. Success of the agency depends on a continuous stream of clients that requires the construction of a sales funnel capable of supporting multiple students at a point in time. Costs include the licensing of tools for student use, space for students to perform their work, client management, and those associated with ensuring that the techniques employed reflect the current state of the industry. In addition, it can be advantageous to bring in a working professional to contribute their expertise thereby further adding an additional cost.

The agency can charge the clients a fee for the work performed, and these fees can offset the ongoing expenses and, over time, the initial costs of setting up the agency. Moreover, as the agency becomes more established and multiple generations of students become involved, experience can serve as an effective teacher as senior members become capable of mentoring new recruits. This reduces the startup workload of the instructor, who can shift to other support areas, and contributes to a decrease in the ongoing costs of operating the agency.

Aligning the Marketing Curriculum and the Agency

Marketing, like many academic disciplines, is structured around the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge required to certify a minimum level of understanding. Assignments are designed to facilitate the knowledge acquisition process in part by developing a student's cognitive abilities. Within this traditional framework, soft skill development is thought to be ancillary and a byproduct of knowledge acquisition or learned through extra-curricular activities.

This has created what Zahay, Pollitte, Reavey, and Alvarado (2022) identify as a lack of constructive alignment between what the marketing curriculum offers and what employers are looking for in a marketing graduate. They highlight three issues. 1] employers

perceive that “students do not have the proper skills” (Davis, Misra, & Van Auken, 2002; Key, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2019; LeClair, 2018; Liu & Levin, 2018; Wilson, McCabe, & Smith, 2018); 2] “programs are too deeply grounded in marketing theory” (Achenreiner, 2001).; and 3] “schools are slow to update their curriculum” (Crittenden & Peterson, 2019; Nicholson, Stephen, & Dascher, 2005; Rohm, Stefl, & Saint Clair, 2019).

This tension between theory and practice in marketing (Beamish & Calof, 1989; Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010; Walker et al., 2009) is particularly acute in digital marketing where the pace of change makes it challenging at best for the typical tenure track faculty member to keep up with new technologies and their application (Langan, Cowley, & Nguyen, 2019; Rohm, Stefl, & Saint Clair, 2019). As a result, we are seeing a number of digital marketing programs adopting experiential learning opportunities in support of their curriculum (Atwong, 2015; Bolton, Chapman, & Mills, 2019; Richards & Marshall, 2019).

One way to think of how the curriculum might align and therefore address our third research question is found in Table 3. Core courses are able to take advantage of the tenure-track faculty who are knowledge creators and are able to bring the latest research into those foundational courses that serve as the basis for the applied work that is done in the Agency.

As shown in Table 3, what sets our student-run digital marketing agency apart is that it is student-driven with the close support of a faculty member and an industry professional. The work that is done and the clients that are chosen and managed are all directed by the student leadership team that runs the agency's day-to-day operations. Students use specialized tools as they work with multiple clients on projects that persist on an ongoing basis. As a result, they can receive real-time feedback based on the work performed and have an opportunity to make adjustments over time. This may continue beyond a single semester.

In contrast to building on Kolb's model (1984) of experiential learning as applied to digital marketing (Frontczak, 1998), our Agency model draws its inspiration from the concept of situated learning developed by

Table 3. Core marketing courses and the agency – a comparison.

	Core Course	Digital Marketing Agency
Instructor	Professor	Student Driven (w/supporting professional)
Pedagogy	Lecture	Self-Directed
Materials	Professor Created	Work Created
Technology	Courseware	Specialized Tools
Project	Case	Multiple Clients
Timing	One Module	Ongoing Relationship

Lave and Wenger (1991). Drawing from early apprenticeship models, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context, that learning is inherently social and involves building relationships with proficient practitioners. What people learn, see, and do is situated in their role as a member of a community. In other words, learning is a function of doing within a particular context and culture.

The Agency is an example of what we call ISA² learning (Informal, Situated, Active and Applied) (Niman & Chagnon, 2021, 2023). The role of the faculty member is to keep work on track, ensure the academic integrity of the experience, and handle various administrative affairs. Industry professionals are invited in as colleagues and a resource to help solve a vexing problem or provide some insight in terms of how to use a tool, technology, or technique. As a result, students are able to take advantage of the tacit knowledge that is acquired over years of direct experience (Coffield, 2000; Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

Learning is situated within the culture, standards, and way of doing things in an authentic setting (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students get a feel for what it will be like out in the “real world” because they are very much doing the work of a digital agency, where resources can be scarce, deadlines must be met, and clients have needs that must be satisfied.

It is both active and applied (Cummings, 2018). Students learn by doing as they actively engage with a client, each other, and industry practitioners. The learning is active and applied because the students are completing a series of job tasks or providing a specific service. All of these tasks and services are applied to a specific client and implemented as part of a scope of work designed to meet the client’s needs.

Confidence is developed over time as patterns are repeated and memories are formed (Morgan & Cleave-Hogg, 2002). They are formed not just by placing ideas in context, but also from repeated use in authentic situations. It is grounded in the basic idea that we learn from experience and doing something over and over again. This enables us to make a series of nuanced calibrations that, over time, generate progress in our capabilities. It is essentially practice with a purpose and as a result, provides a powerful signal to potential employers (Honea, Castro, & Peter, 2017).

The Agency and its Support System

To address the fourth research question, we offer suggestions that might be implemented by others based on

our experience in developing our own Agency. The idea of a student-run agency harkens back to the first student-run public relations agency created at Boston University in 1978. In 2010, there were as many as 119 advertising/PR agencies at university campuses (Haley, Ritsch, & Smith, 2016). Generally, these agencies specialize in public relations, advertising, or integrated marketing communications. They have been found to provide experiences that are valued by hiring decision makers at professional firms (Haygood, Vincent, & Bush, 2019) and generate positive learning outcomes (Bush, 2009; Bush, Haygood, & Vincent, 2017; Haley, Ritsch, & Smith, 2016; Ranta, Davis, & Bergstrom, 2020; Swanson, 2011).

In contrast to other approaches that try to incorporate agency-type activities within existing marketing courses (Raska & Weisenbach Keller, 2021), we created a stand-alone agency that focuses exclusively on digital marketing. The Agency is advised by a marketing faculty member who works closely with the two students who serve as Co-Managing Directors. The Managing Directors organize meetings, manage the strategic partnerships that form the Agency’s ecosystem, and have overall responsibility for client relationships. As the Managing Directors prepare the Agency for the upcoming year, they receive a summer stipend that comes from the Agency’s revenues. The decision-making authority rests in the hands of the Lead Team. The Lead Team consists of the two Managing Directors along with a Director of Finance, Director of External Communications, and a Director of Social Media.

The Agency has grown incrementally each year, and now is at a steady state of 30 associates. We try to evenly balance these between seniors and juniors with a few sophomores (13-13-4). Associates with good performance reviews will be invited to return the following year, and the Lead Team is selected among those who have worked for the Agency and have demonstrated a high level of performance. With seniors graduating, and some associates choosing not to continue, we “hire” 14–15 new associates each year. Selection is competitive as more students want to work for the Agency than are available spots. Students apply initially to be Marketing Strategists, have an opportunity to be promoted to Senior Marketing Strategist, and at some point, manage a project for one of the Agency’s clients.

When students join the Agency, they sign up for a two-credit course where academic credit is awarded by the faculty advisor. The course meets two times per week for 80 minutes per session. Each semester, the faculty advisor is assisted by a contracted industry practitioner, termed “professional in residence,” who

supports the technical skill development, advises on software tools for the Agency to purchase, and provides oversight of the quality of the client work undertaken by the Agency.

While the initial aim of the Agency was to offer a complete array of digital marketing services, we learned that realistically the academic year time frames limit the ability to provide some ongoing services. The Agency will engage in any appropriate needed digital marketing service for a client, but it has chosen to specialize in four areas which work well within the confines of the academic year. These include:

- Digital Presence Audit: covering content evaluation, site analytics, mobile interface, and social media
- Social Media Management: covering planning, strategy, content creation, and advertising planning
- SEO: providing a comprehensive analysis and recommendations to improve search engine optimization, including user interface design, search terms, back links
- Photography and Videography: creation of visual content assets for websites and social media

Students who join the Agency must complete two industry certifications prior to their start, and students continuing in the Agency must complete an additional certification each year. These certifications serve as the baseline knowledge that will grow and expand as the student works on a project team. By putting the knowledge gained through the certification process into practice, the student develops a deeper understanding of a particular tool or area in digital marketing. Here they learn how to effectively use a tool or knowledge set within the context of an actual client relationship. The results are measured by a set of KPIs that are developed in a scope of work that is developed with the client, and actual data is used to measure impact.

One of our earliest clients was a small business focused on weighted wraps, blankets, and other comfortable products both wholesale and online direct to consumer. The Agency's first real test came with client kickoff. An Agency Team Lead said,

“We prepared initial research on the company, our opinion of their strengths and weaknesses, and also a list of questions to ask the client about. We assessed [the client's] marketing situation by comparing it to successful brands, especially those of similar size. In contrasting [the client's] current marketing situation to outwardly successful brands, we identified positive and negative attributes and compiled the best strategy

to move forward by incorporating our own, [the business owner's], and our advisor's thoughts.” (Agency Lead Team Member, Interview, May 2020)

The team next collaborated with the client on a scope of work that included updates to photo assets, coordinate content between the website and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and in addition, they constructed a social media calendar so that updates, blog posts, and e-mail campaigns would be done on a regular basis.

Responding to experience, the business owner said,

“Knowing I was being supported by a team and their professors I was like ‘oh this feels so good! This is going to work!’ And the experience lent itself to other positive outcomes. Just after working with the Agency, I landed two more Whole Foods stores. The energy that just rolled out and just being with this program helped me with that. Huge, huge. And I appreciate it.” (Small Business Retailer of weighted blankets, Interview, May 2020)

Since then, the Agency has engaged a variety of clients that have ranged from personal care services, retailers, restaurants, construction, and distributors, among others.

With clients like this, agency students are provided with a rich and complex environment where their digital skills can be developed, and through client work achieve a level of competency. Their work is assessed by the Lead Team and the faculty advisor. Success is not awarded with a letter grade, but instead, by KPIs and client satisfaction. Further, the reward is the opportunity to work for a more interesting or complex client as either a Senior Marketing Strategist or project manager coupled to earning more responsibility and the ability to play a more significant role in the work of the Agency.

The Ecosystem

For many years the marketing department at the business school that houses the Agency has required a client project-based “Marketing Workshop” as the capstone experience for the marketing students. Projects are recruited from local companies and students work in teams over the course of a semester to deliver a finished product that fits within a negotiated scope of work. The development of the Agency enabled us to turn similar projects into a more meaningful and continuing experience where students would use current digital tools and techniques as part of an ongoing relationship with a client that might span multiple semesters.

What also sets the Agency apart from client project-based courses is the ecosystem that we have developed. Using a community-based approach (Stam & Van de

Ven, 2021) in the creation of a start-up, the ecosystem is shown in [Figure 1](#). To recruit clients, we formed a partnership with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in our state. The SBDC advisors work with over eight hundred companies per year across the entire state. As these advisors work with their clients, they are able to identify and ultimately recruit clients for the Agency.

We recognize as the students in the Agency grow in terms of their knowledge and skills, that in order to continue their professional development, we need to bring in a different caliber of client with more sophisticated needs. In response, we have expanded our ecosystem to include local agencies not just as a source of assistance in exposing our students to the current state of the art, but as partners in the area of client work. Additionally, the agency principals can evaluate the work and provide valuable feedback to evaluate and calibrate the quality of the work.

Either through our relationships with various vendors, or with the dollars generated by client work, we are able to obtain state of the art digital tools that our students can use. Where free tools are not available, the Agency revenues are used to cover the cost of the tools (examples include SEM Rush, Brandwatch, and the entire Adobe Suite). In contrast with the 78% of marketing departments that reported a lack of financial support for industry tools (Zahay, Altounian, Pollette, & James, 2019), the Agency members have access to the full suite of tools they will encounter if, after graduation, they go to work for a digital agency.

All of this has created a strong demand for the Agency services, and the Agency can only accept a portion of the projects that are requested by clients and SBDC Advisors. The Agency can comfortably provide around 12 audits a year, and still have time for larger client projects. Being able to vet the prospective clients increases the chance of success, as the Lead Team and the faculty advisor learn which clients will provide the highest likelihood of success, in terms of what the students will learn from working with the client as well as the Agency's abilities to provide the services required by the client.

The Dynamics of an Agency Ecosystem

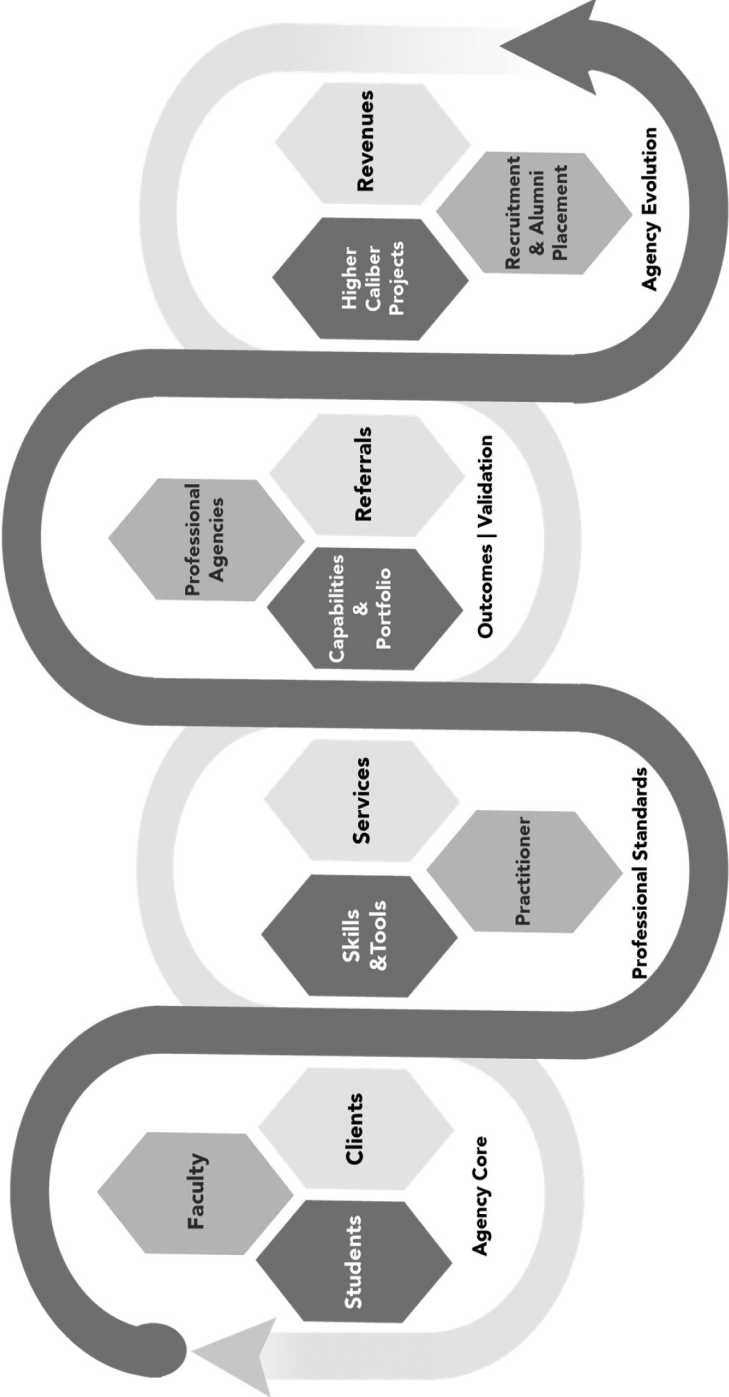
Any student-led agency begins with a core group of students, a funnel for acquiring an initial set of clients, and institutional support. Once those initial pieces are in place, an ecosystem offers the potential for transforming from a static organization to a dynamic set of relationships (Moore, 1993; Teece, 2007). What sets an ecosystem apart from other

organizational designs is that the focus is on the offer (the provision of digital marketing services) and not the organization itself. The delivery of those services is dependent on the collaborations that contribute to the provision of those services and how they impact outcomes (Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018; Kapoor, 2018).

As shown in [Figure 1](#), there are four phases that illustrate the dynamics of the student agency ecosystem. Within the agency core and under the guidance of a faculty member, students embark with a baseline knowledge that enables them to work with clients who do not require very sophisticated services and leads to the generation of modest revenues. During the second phase, a practitioner elevates the students' use of those tools and their development of a more sophisticated set of skills able to provide client services that meet those professional standards that exist in the industry. The third phase is reached when the students have tangible work that both showcase their ability and serve as a foundation for the further development of professional capabilities. With a portfolio of digital marketing projects, the agency may receive more external support and referrals that represent new opportunities and challenges for the students and learning experience.

The final phase captures more changes in the agency itself. As students graduate and gain careers within the industry, the number of alumni who begin to populate agencies increase, who in turn support the agency in terms of funneling potential clients or providing guidance for more advanced services. It places alumni in a strong position to influence recruiters who can subsequently provide internships or employment opportunities for associates working in the agency. With increased participation at a higher skill level, revenues expand and are reinvested in the agency. Over time, this creates the potential for the agency to be self-supporting by covering the cost of faculty, tools, workshops, and any institutional overhead assessed to the agency.

The growth of the ecosystem is reflected in the numbers as shown in [Table 4](#). In four years, the number of students participating has doubled from 15 to 30 students. The number of client projects has increased dramatically from 3 to 16. Finally, revenues, which began at zero, in the latest year total \$14,000. By the end of next year, we project that the number of alumni graduating from the program will be at 42. In terms of the future, growth is slowing as we shift from the start-up focusing on growth, to one that is providing increasingly higher quality academic experiences each year.



Agency Ecosystem Dynamics: As the student-run agency progresses, the ecosystem that is created then strengthens each stage of the process resulting in a more sustainable and robust experience through reinvestment of knowledge and support.

Figure 1. Agency ecosystem and dynamics.

Table 4. Agency growth years 1–5.

	Students	Client Projects	Annual Revenues (\$)	Alumni (Cumulative)
Year 1	15	3	0	0
Year 2	20	8	4,000	8
Year 3	24	14	10,500	18
Year 4	30	16	14,000	30
Year 5 (projected)	30	20	16,000	42

Value of the Agency in Marketing Education

To address the fifth research question, we look at qualitative and quantitative exploratory measures that provide some insights into the value of the Agency to current students, Agency alumni, and clients. When we originally conceived of the Agency, we thought it might serve as an “incubator” that could help small companies with a limited digital presence to understand how their business might be enhanced with the incorporation of current digital tools and practices. The organizing principle was to help clients understand the value afforded by digital marketing and grow their needs to the point where they could be effectively handed off to a professional agency. An agency client that manufactures outdoor clothing reported:

“They [the Agency] did a lot with the website, mobile situation with social media, and they focused heavily with the social media. The students gave a very thorough audit and presentation for the company about next steps to pursue. As a result, I hired a social media coordinator and a part time photographer due to the recommendations that were given by [the Agency].”
(Client email interview May 2022)

Thus, agency work goes beyond project-based learning (Ye, Lee, Cavazos, Katrichis, & Hao, 2021) by introducing the complexity of ongoing client management and allowing our students the opportunity to assess the impact of their work in real time for a real use case. It is no longer about answering the questions on an exam correctly. Instead, it is about satisfying the needs of a client and responding to a marketing landscape where plans may go awry for any one of multiple reasons. As a result, the Agency’s Marketing Strategists learn the importance of being flexible, and they develop the ability to think on their feet as they modify existing campaigns while developing a professional mind-set (Ewing & Ewing, 2017).

All of this takes place in a learning environment where there are built-in protections to guide students for likely positive outcomes. Clients are carefully vetted, the faculty advisor attends client onboarding sessions, and scope of work agreements state the limitations clients should expect, such as end of semester timing while creating the continuity needed for projects to span multiple semesters.

This creates an ongoing relationship that may span months, semesters, or even academic years. This creates relationships that are important to building confidence (Key, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2019; Ranta, Davis, & Bergstrom, 2020). It builds the type of confidence that only comes from seeing how decisions and recommendations play out over time; the type of confidence that comes from the ability to make minor adjustments and improve the original plan.

It also contributes to a different type of confidence that comes from the unique roles played by the Managing Directors and Lead Team. Here, the experience transcends the mastery of digital tools and developing a deeper understanding of client relationships. They are involved in the day-to-day operations of the Agency. Here they learn how to manage personnel and projects. They develop a deeper appreciation of what it takes to develop a business, allocate resources, and ensure that work is done on time and within budget.

Whether in a managerial role, or as a member of a team completing client-based work, the students are given the experiences that enable them to turn skills into competencies and those competencies into capabilities (Niman & Chagnon, 2023). Moreover, they have finished work that demonstrates those capabilities which they can share with potential employers.

Tracking the Value in Marketing Education

To gain additional insight to the fifth research question, tracking and validating the efficacy of the Agency, we created a survey that sought to address what students hope to get from the experience and if the Agency met those expectations. Following approval by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB-2-22-327) at the University of New Hampshire, we distributed a survey to current and past members of the Agency. We pre-tested the questionnaire with the current Agency students during a class session in March 2022. Using the feedback from that, we refined the survey and re-administered it during a class session in May 2022.

The survey was electronic, administered through Qualtrics, and students used a QR code to access the survey. All responses were anonymous. Nineteen

students completed the survey. We then contacted the 20 Agency alumni asking them to complete the survey. Eleven of the 20 completed the survey using the same Qualtrics website, also in May 2022. We repeated this process in May 2023, obtaining responses from 18 students and 7 alumni (note that these alumni were students the previous year).

Results of “Skills Developed”

We asked, “what job-related skills do/did you hope to develop at [the Agency],” using a series of 8 questions (ascending scale, range 1–4, anchored by “Little/none” and “A lot!” respectively). We examined these in the aggregate as well as by groups (students, alumni). Examining the overall means, the responses (Table 5) show that the highest ratings were for the “soft” skills, including working with clients, working in an agency environment, and developing teamwork. On the lower end, the “hard” skills, SEO and Analytics have identical means of 2.78. Between these, grouped closely together (means slightly above 3.00) were content building, social media, and leadership opportunities.

Given the small sample size, we do not attempt to project statistical significance of the mean differences to a larger population; however, given the sample represents about 75% of the total population of the Agency students and alumni, the ordering and grouping by descending means provides meaningful results, especially given the exploratory nature of the survey. We see a strong indication that learning the soft skills are higher in importance than the hard skills.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics – skills developed (descending means).

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Working with clients	55	3.85	.405
Working in an agency environment	55	3.71	.497
Developing teamwork skills	55	3.53	.663
Building Digital Content	55	3.15	.780
Social Media Marketing	55	3.13	.883
Finding a leadership opportunity	55	3.11	.854
SEO	55	2.78	.917
Analytics	55	2.78	.854

Note. Scale range 1–4.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics – Overall confidence and career preparation.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My experience at [the Agency] has prepared me to work at a digital marketing agency.	55	3.61	.529
My experience at [the Agency] gives me an advantage in applying for digital marketing positions.	54	3.72	.452
Compared to my peers, I am more confident in my digital marketing skills.	55	3.56	.660
My experience at [the Agency] has increased my confidence in applying for digital marketing positions.	55	3.71	.458

Note. Scale range 1–4.

Results of Overall Outcomes of the Agency Experience

We also asked a series of questions related to the overall outcomes of the experience of working at the Agency. Some of the questions related to specifics of gaining internships and full-time positions. We also wanted to know if the work inspired overall confidence in seeking and performing in these positions. Table 6 shows the results of the questions that related to overall confidence and career preparation (ascending scale, range 1–4, anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”). As there were no major differences between the current students and alumni samples, we combined the results in the table.

These strong results show that the experience in the Agency digital increases the confidence and makes the students feel more prepared both for seeking digital marketing positions as well as performing in them. This analysis is supported by the written comments that students provided as part of the survey, and a few of the comments show below: (Anonymous respondent comments, Qualtrics Survey, May 2022 and May 2023)

After my time in [the Agency] this semester, I have gained so much more confidence working with other classmates, clients, and professors. It has boosted my analytical skills and made me more confident going into internships and eventually career positions.

I am much more marketable to companies now. I also have built skill sets that weren’t accessible to me through coursework.

[The Agency] helped me stand out from other candidates when applying to internships and jobs!

[The Agency] has made me feel more confident executing digital marketing initiatives.

I had all of my full-time opportunities come from [the Agency]! Everyone is really interested in my experience at a client facing digital marketing agency.

“I’m more confident in my skills and can talk about them and say how I applied my knowledge to a project and then talk about the results seen afterwards.”

With my experience with [the Agency], I am able to apply to positions that are looking for multiple years of experience.

In summary, the survey of students and alumni shows a broad swath of value that the Agency delivers. This comes in the form of the development and practice of digital marketing skills, learning the “soft skills” of teamwork and working with clients, the development of overall confidence in the digital marketing space, and the preparation for careers in digital marketing.

While it can be challenging to keep up with former students (alumni), it will be beneficial to understand the long-term impact of the agency experience. A follow-up study focusing on former students will offer insights into the longer-term effectiveness of this learning model in their professional careers. In addition, a more comprehensive survey that controls for marketing students who do not participate in the Agency, would provide a more robust framework for assessing the outcomes of the experience and their work readiness beyond what is presented here.

Implications and Discussion

Throughout this article we have sought to address several key questions. We began by delineating the “hard” and the “soft” skills, showing how the Agency can provide a different set of skills than what is delivered by the marketing curriculum and experiential projects. We then showed in detail how the agency works to deliver these skills, and we explained how the Agency is set up and how it is supported by an ecosystem. We finished by showing how we track the value of the Agency qualitatively and through a survey of the students and alumni of the Agency.

While the focus has been on the success of the Agency, it is not without challenges, those that have been solved, those that are ongoing, and those in the future. We learned a great deal creating the Agency and encountered several major challenges that were overcome as we learned by doing. Like most new ventures, anticipated and unanticipated challenges have helped shape the Agency as it evolves each year.

Challenge 1: Faculty Outside Their Comfort Zone

Many tenured faculty members have never worked for an agency. For those with related experience, it may not be as relevant for today’s rapidly changing digital landscape. There are no textbooks, exams, or lecturing; it is the scope of work, work produced, and impact to the client which set the framework. Understandably, this can take a faculty member far outside their comfort zone and ultimately stand in the way of success for an agency.

Challenge 2: Student Training

The Agency draws from the pool of undergraduates in the business administration program, but many of the students’ knowledge of digital marketing is limited (typically a textbook driven course for upperclassmen, or possibly only a chapter or two for underclassmen). It can take one or two semesters for a student to build the skill set required for client work.

Challenge 3: Leadership and Succession

If the Agency is to truly be student-run with faculty mentoring and support (not leadership), it must have strong student leaders and organizational structure. The functional structure of the organization and transition of leadership was an early hurdle as student turnover naturally occurs from graduation, as well as from students participating in other opportunities such as study abroad. Time and preparation for transition of operations and knowledge has to be planned.

Challenge 4: Sourcing and Selecting Clients

A major challenge revolves around client acquisition. The Agency found plenty of potential client interest but determining appropriate client fit turned out to be much trickier. Much of this we learned by trial and error. We found that most new companies and start-ups typically didn’t have a strong enough digital marketing presence to provide a good learning experience for the student teams. Alternatively, larger, more established clients needed more resources than we were able to commit – we simply did not have the time or ability to rework a large complex website or an e-commerce platform that featured hundreds of items.

Challenge 5: Financing

Given that the Agency does not have personnel costs (students earn academic credit and the faculty member is assigned as part of their teaching load), and that most of the overhead expenses are covered by the university (workspace, utilities, broadband connections), the ongoing expenses can be covered by the Agency billings. To get started, however, some seed money is needed to purchase software, as well as the commitment to the practitioner-in-residence.

Challenge 6: Managing Class Time

The key constraint the Agency experienced was time available for client work. The course required students

to be in the classroom every Tuesday and Thursday from 12:40–2:00. Those hours are precious as we have to combine coaching and agency administration as well as provide time for the teams to meet to do client work. In order for the entire agency to know what other teams were doing, we would have weekly updates as well as have the teams practice client presentations. As the Agency gained more clients, the “class period” became a crucial resource to manage.

As the Agency looks to the future, there are challenges and opportunities. The major challenge (and opportunity) is the integration and impact of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools available for digital marketing agencies. As an example, one of the Agency alumni who now works in a local digital agency, held a seminar on the use of AI already embedded in Canva and Adobe in developing visual content. Addressing this rapid change will tax the faculty, students, and practitioners, placing more emphasis on the interdependence of the Agency’s ecosystem.

Not every institution will have the resources or institutional commitment to create a student-run digital marketing agency. However, the need to provide marketing students with the necessary soft skills to satisfy the needs and desires of employers remains. Some strategies derived from our experience that marketing professors can successfully incorporate in an existing curriculum to meet these goals follow below:

- *Incorporate Professionals* - Bring in professionals from local digital marketing agencies to mentor work and provide a critical eye. Students respond positively when their work is evaluated by someone who will likely become their supervisor or peer post-graduation.
- *Project Selection* - Select projects that provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the work of students and/or teams. This makes it possible for students to learn from each other thereby creating powerful peer effects that heighten motivation and learning outcomes.
- *Continuous Feedback* – Workshop ideas, ongoing work, and wrinkles that make it possible for everyone to benefit from the efforts of other members of the class.
- *Opportunities for Skill Development* - Give students some agency in their choice of project and allow responsibilities to grow within or across courses. Help students understand that good work creates more challenging opportunities. Provide structure but not too much structure so that students grow accustomed to taking responsibility for their education.

- *Professional Standards* – When students graduate, evaluation will not take the form of a grade at the end of the term. Make students responsible and hold them accountable by creating attainable milestones that provide moments to reflect and highlight good work. Acknowledge quality work by providing recognitions outside of the standard grading process, such as LinkedIn professional/client recommendations or skill endorsements. Introduce professional standards into the evaluation process.

A student-run digital marketing agency creates an experience that hitherto has only been available to working professionals. In doing so, it not only enhances knowledge about digital marketing, but also fosters the development of those capabilities highly sought after by employers. It has truly built a bridge between our AACSB-accredited core curriculum and the practice of digital marketing. It enables our students to work with real clients and industry professionals using the latest tools and techniques available in the industry. Most importantly, our students emerge from the experience “work-ready” and plugged into a professional network that facilitates their transition into a career in digital marketing.

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Ethical Approval

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