Top Chief: A Critical Assessment of a Cross-disciplinary Case Study as Common Intellectual Experience

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Abstract

Common intellectual experiences (CIEs) are one of the lesser-known modalities that have been identified as a high impact practice (HIP) in higher education. This mixed-methods study assesses the outcomes of a short-term CIE, which took the form of a multi-disciplinary, multi-classroom case study focused on Danny Meyer, CEO of Union Square Hospitality group (the titular Top Chief), and his handling of the challenges faced by the hospitality industry under the conditions of the global pandemic. The findings suggest that such CIEs can be effective in fostering integrative thinking both within and across curricula, though the benefits may not accrue equally across all student populations. The study has implications for how universities develop and diversify their HIP portfolios, how faculty implement CIEs in their classrooms, and how students develop their capabilities as wicked problem solvers.

Keywords Case study pedagogy · Case method · Common intellectual experience · High impact practice · Interdisciplinary learning

The present study focuses on a short-term common intellectual experience (CIE), which emerged from an unlikely source of inspiration. In March of 2020, Danny Meyer, founder and CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group, made the difficult decision to close the restaurants that comprised the heart and soul of his business, as a pre-emptive response to the emerging risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision sent ripples throughout the culinary world and established Mr. Meyer as a leading spokesperson for the extraordinary challenges the hospitality industry would face in the coming months. Not only were these challenges extraordinary, they required the integration of new knowledge, the navigation of new (and shifting) government policies, and the establishment of new modes of communication. In other words, the experiences of Mr. Meyer (who prefers to be called Danny)
and the Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG), had all the makings of a robust case study that could potentially be integrated across numerous disciplines and college classrooms. Indeed, the case study we developed based on his remarkable experiences served as the basis for a similarly remarkable CIE, a project which we nicknamed “Top Chief”.

From the beginning, the Top Chief project was intentionally designed to function as a short-term high impact practice (HIP). In 2008, George Kuh articulated the concept of HIPs in a seminal paper for the American Association of Universities and Colleges (AAC&U). Drawing on a large body of student success data, Kuh and his colleagues were able to build a predictive model in which student success was closely linked with engagement in one or more HIPs across the span of their undergraduate years (Kilgo et al., 2015). The original HIPs fell into two categories: the first were well-known practices (and practitioners) with clear anchors in university life, such as study abroad, internships, or undergraduate research. The second category comprised practices that often crossed over multiple aspects of student life, such as learning communities and/or different areas of the curriculum. Kuh deemed activities in this second category “common intellectual experiences” (CIEs). As Kuh describes them, CIEs have evolved from historical beliefs about a core curriculum and include “advanced integrative studies [that often] combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students.” (Kuh, 2008, 1). This latter description fits many of the attributes of the Top Chief case.

Compared to other HIPs, CIE’s have received relatively less attention in the research literature (Montgomery & Harwell, 2020). The two more prevalent forms of CIE seem to be as an experiential facet of learning communities, such as a semester in which students lived and worked in a shared location, like a park, (Grant & MacLean, 2018; Hayford & Kattwinkel, 2018) and/or as a shared cross-curricular experience, often in the form of a common reading (Tallant & Hensley, 2019; Virtue et al., 2018). Because of their cross-disciplinary focus, CIE’s have often been relatively large in either scale, e.g., a book that all freshmen read, or intensity, e.g., a set of linked courses with a common integrative theme. The possibility of variations on the scale, scope, and intensity of CIEs, however, has yet to be the subject of much attention in either research or practice. The Top Chief project represents a potential new modality of comparatively short-term CIEs.

There is some precedent for this kind of exploration within other HIPs. Somewhat out of necessity, Kuh and his colleagues treated each HIP monolithically, not only as roughly commensurate to one another but also as internally consistent, so that there was minimal distinction made between various iterations of each practice. Subsequent research has endeavored to uncover the differential impact between and across modalities of HIPs (Brownell & Swaner, 2009), such as comparing outcomes between short-term and semester-long study abroad experiences (Coker et al., 2018; Paige et al., 2009; Stebleton et al., 2013), or between independent undergraduate research projects and course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) (Bangerra & Brownell, 2014; Brownell & Kloser, 2015; Shaffer et al., 2014). To date, there have been no studies of smaller scale CIEs. The present study seeks to assess the outcomes of a short-duration CIE that integrates a case study across five
courses, representing a range of disciplines and levels, at a small, commuter campus of a large public research university.

The use of case study pedagogy has long had an affinity with the integrative learning that serves as the heart of CIEs. The concept of teaching through case studies (often referred to as the case method) originated at Harvard University’s law school in the 1920s, with the intention of providing law students experience not with legal cases per se, but with applying principles of justice to specific, and often complex, social situations (Krohn, 2010; Merseth, 1991). The practice has continued to expand to other applied professional fields, including psychology, management, engineering, and the health professions (Grossman et al., 2010; Martin & Beese, 2020; Meluch & Gettings, 2019). In this schema, case studies provide an in-depth background on a particular individual, group, event, and/or company that informs decision-making, and students then recommend decisions or actions based on an analysis of the significant factors of the case.

As practitioners at Harvard themselves describe it, “the resulting case presents the story exactly as the protagonist saw it, including ambiguous evidence, shifting variables, imperfect knowledge, no obvious right answers, and a ticking clock that impatiently demands action” (as quoted in Krohn, 2010, p. 36). It is not uncommon for the method to conclude by comparing the recommendations proffered by students to historical decisions made by the actual parties involved. As is perhaps evident from this instructional design, pedagogical research studies of the case method frequently emphasize how the process strengthens students’ problem-solving skills as well as their critical thinking abilities (McDade, 1995; Rostis & Mills, 2010).

The rationale for the case method rests on the assumption that the real world is itself not neatly divided into by clear lines of demarcation between theory, skill, and application. Engagement in case studies is, therefore, considered to be inherently integrative, requiring students to draw upon a range of knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of the environment in which the case is embedded. Nor do real-world cases usually fit neatly into disciplinary silos, making case studies a popular choice for inter- or trans-disciplinary thinking, which is, in turn, is also closely associated with the kind of integrative learning characteristic of CIEs (Dinmore, 1997; Klein, 2005).

For these reasons, advocates have frequently called for greater integration of case studies across disciplines, but, to date, the practice has most often been embedded in disciplinary ways of knowing, at least for those disciplines that have embraced the case method. Disciplinary-based critiques of the case study method often focus on the singularity of the cases, a central feature that inhibits replicability and generalization favored by the sciences, as well as the emphasis on direct application, which inhibits many forms of sense-making in the humanities. That said, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in integrated thinking, especially as a significant component of general education programs (Huber et al., 2005), which provides an auspicious context to reconsider the integrative case study.

In this context, integrative thinking serves not only to connect ideas across disciplines, but also as a means of addressing complex social problems, often described as “wicked” (Hanstedt, 2018; Liedtka et al., 2017; Noweski et al., 2012). Wicked problems are sufficiently complex that they are largely unsolvable, rendering conventional
forms of problem-solving moot and, by extension, requiring the cultivation of a different set of skills, tactics, and dispositions in order to “tame” them (Camillus, 2008). The pedagogy of wicked problems is an emerging field of study (Lehtonen et al., 2019; Murakami et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2021), but the approach shares considerable epistemological affinities with the case method, including an emphasis on reasoning that is neither inherently inductive nor deductive, active decision-making, real world complexity, and components that are “messy”, i.e., ambiguous, contested, and/or unknown (Kate et al., 2019; Rippen et al., 2002). Danny Meyer, and his colleagues in the Union Square Hospitality group, were certainly grappling with a number of wicked problems as they navigated the shifting realities of life under a pandemic and beyond, making Top Chief a strong candidate for a short-term CIE.

The Study

The Context

The Top Chief project was conducted at a satellite campus of a large, public, research university, located in an urban region of the northeastern part of the United States. The campus itself is classified as a baccalaureate college (diverse fields) and acceptance is rated as selective under the Carnegie system. The total student enrollment at the campus is approximately 900, with sizable sub-populations of both first-generation and non-traditional students. The campus offers no housing options, so all students are commuters. Approximately 20% of students enrolled at this campus transfer to the main campus after two years.

The sample used in this study consisted of the student population (n = 104) enrolled in courses from five different disciplines: business management, marketing, information systems, sociology, and human services. The courses were roughly the same size, with enrollment ranging between 22 and 38 students. The business management, marketing, and information systems courses were upper division offerings in their respective majors which were either required or recognized electives for their degree programs. The human services and sociology courses serve as a general education electives, the broader program of which emphasizes integrative learning. Additionally, the sociology course is required for one of the majors offered at the campus. The study took place in the Spring semester of 2021, in which the campus offered both face-to-face and online courses, the former for the first time since the onset of COVID-19 the previous spring. Two of the courses were offered either as face to face or hybrid courses, and three (information systems, sociology, and human development) were fully on-line. The information systems course was accelerated (eight weeks), while the others were offered as part of a standard, fifteen-week semester.

The Intervention

The Top Chief case study was written specifically for the purpose of this project, following the guidelines for case studies articulated by the Harvard Business
School. The information provided in the case study came from publicly available information about Danny Meyer and the Union Square Hospitality group. All students were provided with the basic case information (roughly 4 pages, or 2000 words), regarding Danny Meyer’s handling of the challenges that COVID-19 posed to the restaurant industry. In some cases, additional information or resources were provided to supplement the case within the disciplinary context of the course. In the sociology course, for example, students were provided with a [stylized] detailed breakdown of the Union Square Restaurant group’s staffing.

Instructors were recruited through a campus-wide information session, organized by the principal investigators. Interested faculty then met with an educational developer and lead faculty members to design the integration of the case study into their respective courses. Each participating instructor was encouraged to utilize the case study as a substantive part of their instruction, in whatever manner they deemed most appropriate for the level of the course, disciplinary standards, and student characteristics. For two of the courses (sociology and marketing), the analysis of the case study served as a significant assignment, embedded in classroom-based discussion. In the business management course, the case study served as the basis of an examination, and in the human services and information systems courses, the case study was the basis of discussion, but any further engagement was optional. The use of the case study in instruction was further supported through co-curricular experiences, most notably the live, hour-long “fireside chat” Zoom session held directly with Danny Meyer himself. In this format, students from all of the participating courses did not just listen to Danny Meyer speak, rather they were able to ask questions and interact directly with Mr. Meyer.

The integration of the Top Chief project was perhaps most straightforward in the marketing course, in which this case was one of several that the students worked through over the course of the semester. Similarly, in the business management course, students, working in small teams, viewed the case through the lens of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and engaged in a set of scaffolded activities in which they analyzed multiple aspects of USHGs operations and Danny Meyer’s leadership. In the sociology class, students applied comparative historical analysis to create broader explanations and problem-solving techniques on ethical dilemmas, labor relations, and diversity concerns. Perhaps the most inventive integration came in the human flourishing class, in which the instructor shared the company’s value statement and asked students to work in small groups to identify the connections between those values and the actions taken. In a remarkable coincidence, these students had just read Viktor Frankl’s work on personal values, which Danny Meyer explicitly referenced in his conversation with the students.

**Design and Instrument**

The study uses a pre- and post- design, in which participating students completed a survey before and after engaging with the Top Chief case study, including the
live session with Danny Meyer. The IRB-approved, electronically-distributed survey consisted of fifteen items; i.e., five demographic questions, eight Likert-scale items, and three open-ended questions. The researcher-generated survey questions were subject to three tests of face validity: a student focus group (n = 3), an expert review conducted by an educational researcher, and a pilot dissemination (n = 6). Feedback from each phase was used to revise and strengthen the survey items prior to final dissemination. A second 5-question survey was sent to participating instructors (n = 5).

Participating instructors chose different credit options for their students, so three versions of the survey were generated to accommodate these choices. In version 1, students received no credit for participation and their responses were collected without identifiers. In version 2, the survey was incorporated directly as a class-assignment, so data extraction did not occur until after final grades were submitted. In version 3, the survey could be taken for extra credit—students provided their instructor with a random number, generated by Qualtrics, as evidence of their participation. The survey questions themselves remained the same across all three versions. Pre- and post-survey responses were linked through an open-ended response item in which students provided a self-generated linking code.

The Sample

Altogether, 104 unique undergraduate students responded to the survey. It should be noted that the participants did not always complete all sections of the survey nor was the study team able to link all contributions between the pre- and post-study because of absent data. See Fig. 1 for a demographic breakdown of the sample population, which is roughly commensurate with the student population of the campus as a whole.

Findings

This is a mixed methods study, integrating both quantitative and qualitative responses to survey items to answer the overarching research question: how did this small-scale CIE impact student learning?

Quantitative Results

For the statistical analysis, the researchers broke down the results across three research questions: did the students perceive the Top Chief case study as facilitating their learning (RQ1), did the students perceive the case study method as a useful pedagogical tool (RQ2), and did the case study contribute to more cross-disciplinary communication (RQ3). For the Likert-scaled survey items, the researchers performed paired t-tests for the students who answered both pre- and post-survey questions. Paired t-tests were used for the sub-samples based on their (i) gender, (ii)
Fig. 1  Student Characteristics (Gender, Year in College, Ethnicity, and Majors)
post-graduate plans (graduate school vs. full-time employment), and (iii) incentives (whether the survey was graded or not). The latter test was conducted to control for any differences that might have accrued due to the different versions of the survey used. No significant differences based on incentives were noted throughout.

In terms of RQ1, the evidence from the surveys was overwhelmingly positive. As evident from Table X, students reported that they learned from the case study across the board. This result is not in and of itself surprising, as the survey question simply asks about lower-order knowledge gains. To put it simply, if the students had not heard of Danny Meyer and the Union Square Hospitality group prior to the Top Chief case study, they gained familiarity through the CIE (Table 1).

Beyond simple knowledge, the students also reported gains in their proficiency in working with case studies. This question was included only on the post-survey, so t-tests were not conducted, but, as Fig. 2 reflects, the distribution of reported gains was similarly positive, with 88% of responding students indicating either “agree” or
“strongly agree” to a statement regarding their reported proficiency (“I feel proficient in working on case studies after taking this class”).

While RQ1 focused on learning gains within a particular course, the primary characteristic of a CIE is cross-disciplinary integration. For RQ2, the researchers were interested in student perceptions of the efficacy of case studies as a teaching and learning tool. Our hypothesis was that students (like the faculty) outside of business fields would have limited exposure to the case method, and the Top Chief project could serve to illuminate a potential tool for further cross-disciplinary work. Interestingly, our findings suggest that the students’ beliefs about case studies did not change, but not because of limited or negative prior exposure. Rather, the students showed consistently positive beliefs (falling between “strongly” and “somewhat agree”) about the efficacy of case studies as a teaching method (“case studies help me apply course concepts”), even before their engagement in Top Chief. These perceptions were consistent across all majors represented and did not vary based on reported levels of prior engagement with case studies. See Table 2.

Note: Statistically significant differences appear in bold.

For RQ3, the students were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “over the course of this academic semester, I

Table 2  Survey Q10: Statistical analysis (overall and sub-samples), pre- and post- survey responses

| Top Chief Survey Q10 | Total (N = 33) | 0.0303 | 0.215 | [-0.258, 0.317] | 0.831 |
|----------------------|---------------|--------|-------|-----------------|------|
| Gender               |               |        |       |                 |      |
| - Male (N = 18)      | 0.167         | 0.825  | [-0.260, 0.593] | 0.421 |
| - Female (N = 13)    | -0.077        | -0.365 | [-0.536, 0.382] | 0.721 |
| Goal Orientation     |               |        |       |                 |      |
| - Post-graduate Degree (N = 8) | -0.375 | -1.158 | [-1.141, 0.391] | 0.285 |
| - Full-time Employment (N = 22) | 0.182 | 1.073  | [-0.171, 0.534] | 0.296 |
| Incentives           |               |        |       |                 |      |
| - Version 2 (N = 21) | 0.048         | 0.271  | [-0.319, 0.414] | 0.789 |
| - Versions 1 & 3 (N = 12) | 0.000 | 0.000  | [-0.542, 0.542] | 1.000 |

Table 3  Survey Q4: Statistical analysis (overall and sub-samples), pre- and post- survey responses

| Top Chief Survey Q4 | Total (N = 33) | 0.182 | 0.947 | [-0.209, 0.573] | 0.351 |
|---------------------|---------------|-------|-------|-----------------|------|
| Gender              |               |       |       |                 |      |
| - Male (N = 18)     | 0.500**       | 2.300 | [0.041, 0.959] | 0.035 |
| - Female (N = 13)   | -0.154        | -0.433| [-0.928, 0.620] | 0.673 |
| Goal Orientation    |               |       |       |                 |      |
| - Post-graduate Degree (N = 8) | 0.000 | 0.000 | [-1.182, 1.182] | 1.000 |
| - Full-time Employment (N = 22) | 0.364* | 1.789 | [-0.059, 0.786] | 0.089 |
| Incentives          |               |       |       |                 |      |
| - Version 2 (N = 21) | 0.190         | 0.698 | [-0.378, 0.759] | 0.493 |
| - Versions 1 & 3 (N = 12) | 0.167 | 0.692 | [-0.364, 0.697] | 0.504 |

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interacted with students from other majors”. Our hypothesis was that the shared experience of the Top Chief case study would foster greater interaction between students across majors, whether that interaction was formal, such as during the fireside chat itself, or informal, such as conversation between classes. For the fireside chat, student questions were intentionally structured to feature a range of disciplinary perspectives, and most of the instructors integrated cross-disciplinary perspectives of the case study into their instruction, while encouraging students to discuss the case with others outside of class. The findings suggest that this cross-disciplinary interaction occurred for a subset of the sample student population, with gains accruing to males more than females, and for students (regardless of gender) whose primary post-graduation goal was full-time employment, rather than students intending to enroll in graduate school. See Table 3.

Note: Statistically significant differences appear in bold. * indicates a p-value of <0.05 and ** indicates a p-value of <0.01.

Qualitative Findings

The survey included two open-ended questions, one intended to ascertain the degree to which the students could connect the Top Chief to other courses and a second that asked them to (briefly) evaluate the decisions made by Danny Meyer, an assessment of both the critical thinking that underlay the case, but also the extent to which the entire experience, including speaking with Mr. Meyer directly, may have influenced their thinking.

Integration

In both the pre- and post-test, students were asked to identify other courses that might benefit from including the Top Chief case study, a question intended to assess their ability to perceive integrative potential. A team of two researchers (who were not the instructors for any participating course) coded these categories into disciplinary categories, informed by the classification of majors at the university. There were no discrepancies between the two coders. The majority of responses (46) were in recognized business fields, such as management (15) and economics (12). A second category of responses were business adjacent (12), such as communications, which was sometimes framed in the context of business (e.g., crisis communication) but also more broadly (e.g., speech communications). Similarly, ethics was mentioned seven times, but not always in the context of business, as several (3) students specifically mentioned bioethics. A third category of social science applications (18) included psychology (11) and health/medicine (7), the latter of which were often very broadly stated (e.g., “medicine”), perhaps because these courses are not offered at the campus.

The final category (15) encompassed a much wider range of other connections, including choices such as graphic design, English (children’s literature), nutrition, statistics, criminal justice, and “science”. A handful of students (n=3) struggled to make connections (“not sure what others would [apply]”, “I cannot think of a second class
that would tie into this”). Others were enthusiastic in their support for the method, e.g., “any course could benefit from a case study! Real life situations are the perfect way to link concepts and learning”, “pretty much all courses [would benefit from this case study]. I would actually like to see more case studies integrated into our curriculum as I think they are very good at making us learn and apply concepts.” These latter statements provide additional support for the finding, listed above, that these students were easily able to identify the benefits of learning through case studies.

In addition to these testaments to the benefits of cases studies for all classes, other students justified their specific choices by referring to the value of real-world application (e.g., “go through real life experiences”; “use real life statistics instead of made up scenarios”), the integration of higher order thinking (e.g., “they could provide students [in a law class] with an opportunity to evaluate access to legal aid in practice, and to constructively assess strategies for.

improving access to legal aid in different jurisdictions”), and other general benefits (e.g., “add depth to the coursework”, “learning from Mr. Meyers mistakes”, “it will be easier for me to understand the truth [in difficult classes]”).

Critical Thinking

In the final question of the survey, students were asked to (briefly) evaluate Danny Meyer’s decision making during the pandemic. A team of two researchers (who were not the instructors of any participating course) coded these responses into three categories: positive, negative, or neutral. Individual entries could receive up to two codes per response. There were no discrepancies registered between the two coders. In the pre-survey, the majority of students expressed either neutral or positive judgements, providing relatively short commentary to support their interpretation (see Table 4). This outcome is perhaps reflective of the limited depth of their engagement with the case at that point. In the post-survey, however, only one response was neutral, while the others showed not only a broader range of interpretations (see Table 4), but also lengthier justifications for their choices, indicating their engagement in critical thinking. This outcome was further reinforced by the instructors, all of whom mentioned evidence of increased critical thinking within the context of their respective courses.

It appears evident that the opportunity to talk directly to Danny Meyer served to frame this question differently. The students who participated in the fireside chat indicated either mixed or positive judgements of his decision-making, while all of the negative responses were made by students who did not attend the event. This influence

| Table 4 | Student Assessment of Decisions Made, Pre- and Post, by percentage |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | Pre-Survey % n = 21 | Post-Survey % n = 28 |
| Neutral/decline to state | 38 | Neutral/decline to state | 3.5 |
| Mixed   | 24 | Mixed | 46.5 |
| Positive | 38 | Positive | 36 |
| Negative | 0 | Negative | 14 |
was mentioned explicitly in two cases, e.g., “I may have tried hard to not layoff 95% of the company, however after hearing Mr. Meyer speak on why he had to make those calls, I don’t think I would’ve done too much different otherwise.” This shift in thinking was also noted by the instructors, one of whom noted, “one student in particular was highly critical of Mr. Meyer’s decisions in his case analysis. After hearing Mr. Meyer describe the rationale behind these decisions, the student’s perspective changed. He later stated that he didn’t realize how complex the decision-making process was and that he had a greater admiration for everything that goes into these decisions”.

A number of the positive responses emphasized Mr. Meyer’s personal qualities, described as “compassionate”, “caring”, “chivalrous” and “honorable” which emerged largely through the fireside chat. Even those who provided mixed responses seemed to temper their assessments of his decisions with their perceptions of Danny Meyer as a person, e.g., “I would say he was caring, but not bold enough”, and/or with empathy to the extraordinary circumstances he faced, “I think at the time when there was not enough information and the pandemic was very new, there would not have been different options for him to choose from.” These responses suggest that students had begun to recognize the complexity of real-world decision-making, especially when made by real people and for real people, such as USHG’s employees and customers.

Discussion and Implications

Our results indicate that short-duration CIEs, such as the Top Chief case, can be used to foster integrative thinking within and across the curriculum, particularly if the experiences are connected through both content and pedagogy. The varied applications of the case, particularly when coupled with a shared co-curricular event (e.g., the fireside chat with Danny Meyers), further suggests that there may be pedagogies that are particularly well suited to working across multiple disciplines and engendering integrative thinking. Based on our experiences, it seems possible that a case study (or perhaps a set of linked case studies) could serve as the basis for a widely shared CIE, perhaps even providing a robust alternative to the current emphasis on common readings. One could imagine, for example, all first-year students working on a shared real-world problem, bringing the disciplinary lenses of their various courses to bear on the challenge of identifying multiple pathways forward.

Such a prospect may sound appealing, as it seems to dovetail with many of the goals of general education in the United States, including an emphasis on integrative learning, creative problem-solving, and active citizenship. That said, a large-scale case study CIE would face considerable challenges, some cultural, some logistical, and others philosophical, similar to those noted by other scholars of interdisciplinary work (Bendix et al, 2017; McCoy & Gardner, 2012; Osbeck, 2020). Logistically speaking, American universities have long been organized into disciplinary silos, with standards, curriculum, and related outcomes established at the level of the department or college/faculty. Integrating both content and pedagogy across these disciplinary divides, as a CIE seeks to do, faces similar challenges as other broader trends in academia that seek to break down these silos, whether in teaching or research. As multiple studies attest, these processes are often hampered by
the lack of formal mechanisms in place to facilitate such conversations. The campus where this took place is relatively small, with approximately forty full-time faculty. Like many small campuses, both formal and informal interactions are a strong facet of university culture. Expanding the scope of this project, whether in intensity or scale, at this institution and others would require strengthening community as well as developing additional administrative scaffolding to make such projects sustainable.

In terms of disciplinary culture, it can be challenging to identify a CIE with both content and pedagogy that resonates similarly across multiple contexts. In the case of Top Chief, the experiences of the Union Square Hospitality Group were multi-variate, timely, and on-going, all characteristics that were critical to its success. As the student responses attested, there were linkages in the case to a wide range of disciplines, including arts, humanities, social sciences, and the health professions. Even so, not all disciplines were able to connect to the case, including two professors of physics and English literature who attended the interest session. The literature professor struggled to connect the content—indeed, how does one bring together Danny Meyer and William Shakespeare—while the physics professor faced a challenge that was more pedagogical, as case studies are not often used in the hard sciences, due, at least in part, to the lack of generalizability. A case could be made, too, that the challenge also occurs on an epistemological level, as certain disciplinary ways of knowing have proven to be more dexterous in working across disciplines (and pedagogies) than others (Lattuca & Stark, 1994; Tight, 2015).

These disciplinary categorizations have been the subject of recent criticism, however, as they tend to reify what may be inherently more dynamic or diverse tendencies within a discipline (Simpson, 2017). While it may be difficult to connect Danny Meyer and William Shakespeare, for example, the sociology professor was able to pair Danny Meyer’s case with a reading from George Orwell’s first novel, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), which provides commentary on the sociology of casual labor in restaurant kitchens. The management professor noted too, that he was attracted to the case because it allowed him to integrate sustainability, a subject about which both he and his students are passionate, into a course that might not otherwise have that as a primary focus. That said, faculty in courses that could be described as applied, especially those that emphasize career-ready skills, such as business and information systems, had a more straightforward path in integrating Top Chief into their instruction.

A similar distinction also arose in the student responses, as students who described themselves as career-oriented indicated that they were more likely to engage with students from other disciplines, whereas students who intended to apply for advanced study tended to stay more in their respective disciplinary lanes. This finding suggests that the rationale for case studies and, by extension, the integrative thinking they are intended to foster, may be tied to their applicability to the workplace (Lyons & Bandura, 2020). This is perhaps not entirely surprising, as both case studies and the case method were originally developed to prepare students to navigate the complexities of real-world challenges in applied fields, such as law and business.
That said, in some key ways Top Chief differed from conventional case studies. The classic method is primarily an exercise in postmortem analysis, i.e., reflecting on past experience rather than projecting towards the future. The focus of Top Chief may have been on Mr. Meyer’s decision-making under the unprecedented conditions of COVID-19, but without the expectation that these same conditions are likely to be repeated in the future (or so we can all hope). Indeed, in his direct interactions with the students, Mr. Meyer spent far more time looking into the future than the past, suggesting that the method should be re-oriented towards a future which may become increasingly disconnected from precedent, whether legal, temporal, or experiential.

Even prior to COVID-19, a number of studies critical of the case method had emerged in business circles (Ille Carrier, 2007; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Moskovitz, 1992; Servant-Miklos, 2019; Smith, 1987). The increasingly prevalent entrepreneurship education model in business fields calls for the incorporation of living case studies, especially immersive and intensive experiences, ranging from student run pop-up restaurants (Demetry, 2017) to student project incubators that attract real investors (Foo and Turner, 2019; Wright et al., 2017). These next-generation case studies perhaps even have greater potential to leap over disciplinary divides, as they are embedded in experiences that are inherently ambiguous and are defined as much by the learner as they are the instructor or the other players in the real-life scenario (Rippin et al., 2002). As one instructor noted, having Danny Meyer come and interact with the students was “a really big deal,” and it elevated the conventional case study to an experience the students could readily integrate into their personal and professional lives, regardless of career orientation.

In many ways, the Top Chief project served as a case study of the viability of next-generation, multi-disciplinary case studies as CIEs in higher education. Our experience suggests that there are reciprocal benefits to all of the stakeholders that participate in these types of activities. Myopia is lessened when business leaders hear different perspectives. College students provide unique insights and solutions that organizations may not have considered. Universities gain when students succeed. To truly measure their impact, however, would require the extension of this experience to a multitude of institutional contexts, community/industry partnerships, and student populations. Assessing impact is not just about scale and scope, but also duration. Like other measures of high impact practices, it would be beneficial to capture the long-term impact of such experiences on student success measures, such as retention and graduation rates, and, ultimately, their ability to work effectively in their chosen careers, whatever those may be.

As the world collectively faces an increasingly unpredictable future, higher education finds itself increasing unmoored from its own future orientation, leaving many scholars wondering how we need to teach, and what students need to learn, to be prepared for such an uncertain future. Our experience suggests that we may be able to show them how to face complex, even super complex, wicked problems, and, rather than be daunted by these challenges, they can work together and embrace them with alacrity, integrity, and good grace. As Danny Meyer himself once noted (2006, p.3), “business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It’s that simple and that hard.”
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