

Administrative Challenges of the Service Learning Lab Option with Non-Profits

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Service learning provides professors an opportunity to allow students to serve nonprofit organizations and share their experiences through reflection sessions and reports. Based on a literature review, administrators such as deans, department chairs, and service learning managers have many challenges and potential opportunities associated with service learning in coordinating professors, students, and clients. To further demonstrate the challenges, a case study of the service learning lab option from a western university highlights administrative issues and points to gaps in present service learning research. Suggestions for future research follow.

Service learning involves “an educational methodology that combines community service with explicit academic learning objectives, preparation for community work, and deliberate reflection” (Gelmon et al., 2001). Service learning provides the nonprofit sector of the economy with services ranging from market analysis, volunteer management, advocacy, fundraising, human resource management, and financial analysis. The nonprofit sector comprises more than 1.9 million registered organizations, employs more than 13 million people, and generates annual revenues exceeding \$1.1 trillion dollars (Worth, 2012). This often overlooked sector offers many opportunities for experiential learning and for future internship and employment opportunities for students.

Purpose of Paper

There are several ways service learning can be completed. First, a nonprofit client comes to class, presents a problem, and students provide a report dealing with the problem. The client may visit the class several times. Students also may visit the client but they do not work for the client. Second, students provide significant community service for a nonprofit client as part of a class requirement. Students work at the nonprofit in an area related to their class and also attend lectures at school. The work and the lectures cover the same topic area but are not fully integrated. Third, the student works part or full-time at the nonprofit's location to get credit for a full university service learning course. This approach appears somewhat similar to an internship.

A final example, and focus of this paper, is the lab option that is a formal supplement to an existing course on a university campus. Students register for an existing course - say human resource management for three credits. They have an option of taking a fourth credit service learning option associated with that course. If they do so, they would be doing special projects for a nonprofit while requiring reflection sessions (described later) and reports that directly relate to the human resource management course.

This paper describes a service learning lab option, briefly shows its immediate rewards, and then states some of the practical challenges that administrators face in coordinating professors, students and clients associated with that lab option. The main contributions of the study include a case study of the service learning lab option from a western university that highlights administrative issues and points to gaps leading to future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most service learning literature seems to focus on the significant advantages of service learning assignment for university students and the communities at large through empirical studies. Examples are provided below.

Advantages

Service learning assignments in general do provide significant advantages for the university students

based on adult learning (Andragogy) theory. In this theory, adult learners should not just hear lectures but have a rich variety of learning experiences to enhance learning (Knowles, 1984). Service learning assignments provide those experiences with interviews with organization managers, visits to organization sites, working together in groups, and writing reports. Adult learners also can apply their vast knowledge in these wide settings to help nonprofits.

University students who volunteer for service learning assignments tend to have greater leadership ability, social self confidence and critical thinking and conflict resolution skills (Astin and Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 1999). They may use their volunteer experiences to enhance career prospects to get better jobs and higher salaries (Freeman, 1997; Prouteau and Wolff, 2006; Katz and Rosenberg, 2005). Expanded volunteering is also associated with the effort to build resumes (Handy et al., 2010). Concerning their personality, they have broadened self-efficacy (Tucker and McCarthy, 2001), confidence (Konwerski and Nashman, 2002), personal satisfaction and fulfillment (Rehling, 2000), and a sense of social responsibility (Kolenko et al., 1996).

Nonprofit organizations also can benefit from service learning. Organizations benefit through access to university resources, positive relationship opportunities with the university, awareness building of community issues, opportunities to contribute to the educational process, affordable access to professional development, and short- and long-term solutions to important community needs (Institute for Learning and Teaching, 2007). Studies associated with the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs student projects (Bright et al., 2007), New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service Capstone Projects (Schachter and Schwartz, 2009), and several nonprofit graduate degree programs (Mirabella and Wish, 1999) showed general high satisfaction of student performance on projects as rated by nonprofit organizations receiving the services. Major issues covered through service learning include K-12 education, hunger, tutoring, poverty, environment/sustainability issues, housing/homelessness, mentoring, health care, reading/writing, and senior/elder care services (Campus Compact, 2011).

Faculty report gains from service learning. Within their classrooms, there are more lively class discussions, greater participant retention of course material, greater student awareness of community and real world issues, and more innovative approaches to classroom instruction. Outside of class, there are enhanced opportunities for research and publication and greater faculty awareness of community issues (The Institute for Learning and Teaching, 2007). In a study of service learning faculty practitioners, O'Meara and Niehaus (2009) found that the four dominant reasons for faculty participation in service learning were as a model for teaching and learning (strategy to learn the discipline, exposure to diversity), as an expression of personal identity (personal commitment, religious experience), as an expression of institutional context and mission, embedded in a specific community partnership. According to Campus Compact (2011) faculty can also use service learning in some institutions to contribute to their promotion and tenure, obtain grants related to service learning, attend service learning conferences, give awards to faculty, allow sabbaticals for service learning research, scholarship, and program development, and publish research about service learning that in turn further enhances their promotion and tenure chances.

According to Campus Compact (2011), administrators benefit from service learning because service learning can enhance the organizational mission once it becomes a widespread institutional priority. Furthermore, major successes in service learning can be publicized to enhance the reputation of the educational institution and to make further connections with the nonprofit community.

Challenges

Though the literature tends to have glowing reports about the efficacy about service learning for students, nonprofit communities, professors, and administrators, the literature does not discuss as much the many practical problems they have in maintaining and enhancing service learning experiences.

For example, Petkus (2000) mentions that clients sometimes fail to participate fully. They may start with high interest levels but as time goes on their interest falls short of full involvement. Careful screening of clients may be needed to ensure that they are able to follow through on projects.

When compared to other training methods, service learning is more time consuming for the professor. This is especially true in terms of its initial design and facilitation (Madsen and Turnbull, 2006). In addition, professors might not be comfortable with this particular method of training because this is untried territory for some (Clark et al., 1997).

For students, service learning can be messy and unpredictable. They face ambiguity and uncertainty in assignments (Bush-Bacelis, 1998). Students face problems when some contacts do not answer phone calls (Madsen and Turnbull, 2006). Students often receive truncated understandings of the nature of social problems and strategies of social change (Eby, 1998).

Administrators include service learning coordinators, university/college presidents, deans, associate/assistant deans, and department chairs. Their role is to help the educational institution relate its mission and objectives to service learning in order to help service learning programs become an active part of the curriculum for professors, students, and the non-profit community.

A major challenge for administrators is to collect the integrity of interests and cultures of all stakeholders. Students, clients, service learning coordinators, local governments and professors have to be coordinated in a way that makes sense for the school and for the client. It is too often that conversations and planning are done in pairs rather than representatives from all the groups involved. (Eby, 1998; Krisnawati, 2009). Administrators need to carefully organize the feedback provided to professors associated with service learning in order to make service learning effective (Chang, 2011).

Lingnan University provides a model for the administration of service learning. The article describes the processes and strategies of incorporating service learning into courses and evaluating the experiences of students throughout the curriculum (Chan et al., 2009). What the article does not provide is how to document instructor's efforts for promotion and tenure purposes and how to document how service learning fits in the scheme of the university.

At California State University, the governing board gave service learning its strongest endorsement. Then a service learning coordinator was appointed. Workshops were offered, grants written, meetings held, and campus subgrants awarded. By 2000, more than 1000 service learning courses were in the California State University system. Unfortunately, it was not a complete system wide revolution but a series of mini innovations of committed individual faculty members who used service learning (Eckart et al., 2006).

At Portland State University in the 1990s, the school was in the middle of a financial crisis. Community-based learning became one of the central pedagogies of the new general education curriculum known as university studies. This type of learning spread to other majors in the institution. Portland State's Center of Academic Excellence "tries to integrate assessment and community engagement strategies into teaching and research activities and ultimately into the core of university life" (Kecskes and Spring, 2006, p. 223).

At Chandler Gilbert Community College, service learning was introduced by the university by an orientation to faculty in all departments. A ten minute video defined service learning, illustrated the various models with footage from campus events, and included various testimonials from students, faculty and staff from a variety of community agencies. The service learning program in the English department in particular has continued because there has been continued commitment from the various department chairs who have rotated into the position (Mason and Davenport, 2006)

Efforts to institutionalize service learning across higher education institutions have been a difficult task. Service learning is not already a part of the institutional practices and norms of many higher education bodies (Butin, 2006; O'Meara and Niehaus, 2009). Departmental reward structures might not appropriately support service learning in terms of tenure and promotion (Eckardt et al., 2006). In a survey of nine research campuses, the most cited problem in the development of service learning is the lack of faculty incentive and the absence of promotion and tenure rewards for engaged scholarship in the area. Moreover, faculty often think of service learning as somewhat anti-intellectual and related to vocational training (Hollander, 2009).

The most comprehensive research study on administrative issues on service learning involves Campus Compact's (2011) survey of campus engagement efforts. In its survey of higher education institutions,

efforts for faculty engagement include 70% of campuses providing faculty development workshops, 67% providing materials for reflection and assessment, 64% providing curriculum models and syllabi, 61% offering financial support to attend service learning conferences, 44% offering grants to support curriculum redesign, 44% giving awards to faculty, 41% including service learning and community orientation in faculty orientation, and 24% allowing sabbaticals for service learning research.

Also in the Campus Compact (2011) survey, efforts for institutional support of student service include the following: 75% public dialogs on current issues, 71% awards for students for service, 63% considering service in awarding scholarships, 61% providing funding for student service learning, 60% defining and identifying service learning courses, 59% managing liability associated with service placements, 57% coordinating transportation to and from community sites, 50% giving extra credit for community service participation, 35% designating service learning course in the course guide, 24% offering students mini-grants for service related initiatives, and 12% requiring service for graduation.

METHODOLOGY

To study administrator implications of service learning lab option, this study focuses on one state university in the western United States. One of the authors is a department chair and the other is a professor. Both teach a human resource management course offered to junior and senior level business students. Both have about fifty students in each human resource class. About half of the students are general business majors, a quarter are human resource management majors, and the rest are a mix of entrepreneurship, construction management, and health management majors. All general business, human resource management, and entrepreneurship students must take the class. For the other students, the class is one of several options they may take.

The service learning component of the class is completely optional for everyone and is one extra credit. Usually about five to ten students choose the service learning option per class. Students who register for the service learning option receive their assignments within the first week of class.

Since individual students (rather than the entire class) volunteer to take the option of a one-credit service learning lab in addition to the base course, it's less appropriate for the community sponsors to visit the classroom. The service learning students, however, spend generally 30-40 hours over the semester, serving at the nonprofit site.

Administrative Steps

To implement service learning labs, several administrative steps were established: First, on the administrative side, the university committed to doing service learning in its overall objectives and college by college objectives. There is a commitment to interact with the community through service projects. In the College of Business and Economics, similar wording involving community engagement is used. However, community engagement is not considered as important as research and teaching. For faculty, a standard workload would involve 40% research, 40% teaching, 10% internal service, and 10% community engagement. Community engagement could not only include service learning but could also include internships, guest speaking, memberships and attendance at local professional organizations, and consulting. The bulk of faculty work would involve research (at least two refereed journal articles every five years), teaching (2-3 courses per semester), and committee assignments (2-4 depending on committee intensity). The loads would correspond to accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) in which the university desires to continue.

Second, a clear commitment to service learning was set by the university in hiring a full-time service learning manager and staff and by setting the mission of the service learning program. The service learning program exists to foster active citizenship and enhance learning through academically-based community service. The program provides logistical support by prescreening agencies who are oriented to work with college students, providing sample forms, agreements, timelines, and checklists, providing teaching assistants for monitoring, record keeping, and trouble shooting, organizing evaluations for students agencies, and faculty, and establishing online student project registration and partnership

coordination. Course planning support includes one-on-one planning consultation, sample syllabi, workshops and roundtables with other faculty, and a supportive network with other faculty on campus participating in service learning. There is grant support of \$300 planning grant for first time service learning faculty. Online liability policies include safety policies for students and risk and liability coverage.

The service learning program has several resources that showcase faculty for their promotion and tenure portfolio. On the service learning website, various service-learning publishing outlets, tips and other resources are presented. Many of these resources come from the National Service Learning Clearing House. To document service learning in a promotion and tenure portfolio, the service learning department suggests various actions and strategies. The department also outlines various ways faculty can gain recognition through participation in service learning in the university and the community. Recognition can come in the form of letters to the provost for new service learning faculty, letters of appreciation from the service learning director to the dean, news bites to the local media about service learning accomplishments, service learning Faculty of the Year awards, civic engagement exhibitions, certificates for completing a service learning faculty fellows seminar, and exemplar syllabi posted on the service learning website.

Third, the university committed to establishing service learning by authorizing one credit lab additions to existing three credit courses. Professors could voluntarily choose to add service learning credit by contacting their department chair about six months before the new semester started. The course, such as human resource management would not only have an HRM 305 listing for three credits but would also have an HRM 305SL (service learning) listing for one credit. That one credit listing would be optional for students if they were to choose HRM 305.

Fourth, community partner relationships are developed and found through the help of the service learning staff and other parts of the university such as small business development centers, prior students, prior nonprofits, or articles in the local or university newspaper. Advertising in the newspaper should highlight that the service is free and several students would be providing consulting for free. The service learning center sponsors a semi-annual service learning Volunteer Expo in which professors with potential nonprofits could get together to provide potential linkages for future classes.

Fifth, individual colleges incorporated service learning by encouraging professors to voluntarily participate. In the statement of objectives in the College of Business and Economics, participation in community activities is encouraged. Community engagement is one of the four prongs of faculty activity that are to be recorded electronically in a database called Digital Measures that all faculty share. That database is used by department chairs to help determine faculty pay raises and promotion and tenure.

Professor, Student, and Client Steps

Once the administrative portion is completed and the students have registered for the service learning section, it is up to the professor, student and client to finish the job of the service learning. Several steps must be completed among them:

First, the professor and students must identify the need for service. Service assignments vary based on the organization's needs and the experience level of the student. The human resource management course (HRM) typically has a specific HRM related project, such as developing a policy manual, collecting and analyzing data for a records retention system, updating client and volunteer files, assisting refugees in identifying and applying for jobs, and helping design and administer training programs. The specific project related assignment gives a focused, in depth view of one HRM practice, or may address several HRM areas.

Second, the client, student, and professor must be coordinated during the semester. Reflection sessions with the students enrolled in the lab and the instructor are held bi-weekly to apply course principles to their experiences. Student selection of different agencies adds richness to the discussion. In addition to the 30-40 hours of HRM service, each student conducts a one-hour interview with a manager, volunteer coordinator, or executive director close to the end of the semester. This is another opportunity for the

students to reflect on their live experience and ask course content-related (both structured and semi-structured) questions of the manager. This one-hour interview allows in depth interchange between the student and community sponsor and prepares the student for a required analytical report of the student's learning experiences and applications to course principles. Often student recommendations and observations are sought by the nonprofit manager to aid in strategic planning.

With most nonprofits in the community, attendance at a group orientation is also required. In addition to being a way to solidify the obligations of the community partner and student, this is another worthwhile experience shared with other volunteers, service learners, and trainers.

In order to expose many students to the uniqueness of service learning, and the nonprofit sector, the lab students are required to present a short report to the larger class and answer questions about their service learning experience and its application to the course curriculum. In addition to sharing the real life experiences with the larger audience, this presentation is usually one of the best received presentations of the semester. For some curious students, this is the first informational encounter with the nonprofit sector seen through a peer's experience. For others, it is a compelling invitation to enlist in other experiential learning activities such as civic engagement, volunteerism, internships, or even employment.

The immediate positive benefits and especially weaknesses of the service learning module are based on a combination of author perceptions and service learning evaluations by students over the last year and a half since the beginning of 2010.

Administrative Benefits in Service Learning

Service learning fits the College of Business and Economics objectives of having more contact with the outside community. While a career opportunity may arise in many cases, the primary objective of the service learning experience is application of course concepts while meeting a community need. As this happens, students also reflect upon themselves personally and professionally and consider their responsibilities to the larger community. According to one of the human resource management lab students, "It has changed my perception of the value of social services and the important role that they play in society and in our communities. I further recognize the importance of valuing people for who they are and the affect that each person has on everyone else." Another echoed this sentiment, adding, "...helping people in need is much more gratifying than receiving any type of paycheck. Paychecks end up getting spent on something that ends up getting thrown away while the memories you get from watching a kid smile at a Christmas Party because they are opening a present that some stranger got them is without a doubt something that will make anyone smile."

Service learning provides both direct (to the service-learner) and indirect (other members of the class not involved in the service requirement) benefits. For example, one member of the class audience was so curious about the highlighted community organization, that after class she went directly to the computer lab to learn more about it. Subsequently, she enrolled for and completed a major fundraising marathon race. In doing so, she found that she had a distinct interest in employment in the nonprofit sector, something that she had not considered before. She has recently been offered and accepted a part-time position with this social service agency recruiting volunteers.

Most students involved with the program state there is self-gratification at being able to personally contribute assistance to nonprofit social service agencies and especially the clients. They often declare that they will continue their service with this or other agencies. Many students also express satisfaction in learning about the nonprofit sector and applying classroom topics with an actual real-world nonprofit organization, something they had not had the opportunity to do with this sector, in other classes.

Service learning has helped the College of Business and Economics compete with other business schools in the area. There are a plethora of for-profit on-line programs that do not have service learning or even internships. These programs in our university provide a competitive advantage to the seven schools that have entered the region. We have been able to advertise service learning on our website showing the variety of nonprofit organization opportunities students can receive.

With the service learning contacts, there is potential for making excellent money raising contacts for student scholarships and further enhancements to the service learning program. The money could be coming from the nonprofits themselves or board members who see the advantages of continued relationships with the college or university.

Administrative Challenges in Service Learning

A major challenge for deans, department chairs, and the service learning manager at the university is to make sure that the service learning lab option fits in the strategic plan of the university, colleges, and departments. It has to make sense for professors to be encouraged to add the lab option not only to enhance the program but also to enhance their careers. At the university, service learning is encouraged but is not a top priority. Because of the lack of prioritization in service learning, getting faculty to add one credit to their teaching load with service learning is like pulling teeth. It is at the goodness of their heart that they do it because it takes time away from research which is the top priority. Faculty must publish two to three major refereed journal articles in five years to be academically qualified according to our accreditation goals.

Service learning adds one extra credit to a professor's teaching load. This one extra credit might not make sense for a new assistant professor in a major university whose major mission should be to publish in journals rather than focus on teaching. Service learning with all of its reflection sessions, search for new clients, and extra grading would simply take away time from the research without getting much credit in return for the extra work involved to do the service learning.

Obtaining clients can be challenging each semester whether it is done by the administration or by the professor. Though a service learning department on campus holds a mixer each semester matching professors with potential nonprofits, it is not guaranteed that nonprofits will be available. Other sources of nonprofits can be Small Business Development Centers, visiting local charities, prior service learning clients, personal contacts, and local organizations.

Sometimes clients disappear in the middle of the semester, leaving the students with no client to work with. It occasionally happens because the client may run out of funding or may move out of state. The priorities of the business or community partner might be to respond to recipients of social services. For example, finding safe harbor for an abused spouse and her children, for the Women's and Children's Alliance, far outweighs in priority an appointment with a student, or any constituent for that matter. Furthermore, some clients may be unavailable during the middle of the semester because they are taking a vacation, have some personal problems, or show a lack of interest in the project. Service learning managers and professors may or may not have back up clients just in case clients disappear.

Students sometimes express frustration at another weakness of the service learning lab option such as a mismatch of the project or assignments as promised by the community partner and the actual assignment(s). When assignments are clerical and general in nature, and not related specifically to the main human resource management class they are taking, students are disappointed. One of the key concepts in service learning lab option is the application of course concepts to academically based community service. It is difficult to tie human resource management course concepts directly to a general assignment. As well, students who expected and are prepared to provide thirty to forty hours of quality service on a specific human resource deliverable project are less likely to be able to use the general or clerical assignments, as evidence of an accomplishment, on a resume, in an interview, or simply for professional enrichment. Service learning coordinators and professors would need to know if there is a problem with a client in order to help provide a back up client if one were available.

Students might drop out of service learning for personal reasons. A client might feel jilted when he or she loses students in valuable service learning roles. It is important for the client to have backup plans in case student projects do not pan out especially due to the volunteer nature of the projects. This is an administrative public relations problem.

SOME SOLUTIONS TO PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Administrator and Professor Challenges

Clear organizational strategies and administrative commitment to those strategies are two of the most effective ways to solve many key organizational problems. Without administrative buy-in, nothing much can happen (Worth, 2012; Holland & Ritvo, 2008). In this light, many of the problems of the service learning lab option just listed can be reduced if there is a clear understanding of the role of service learning in the university. The university must have a clear commitment to service learning in its strategic plan and it must place its commitment in its faculty in places where it counts - specifically in its tenure and promotion and financial reward structures. If faculty chose the service learning lab option and that choice helped them obtain higher pay, promotion, and tenure that would indicate a significant commitment to service learning by university administration.

Student and Client Challenges

The clear expectations that administrators should have for professors associated with the service learning lab option should correspond to the clear expectations between professors, students, and clients. In comparison with case studies and other assignments done in and out of class, service learning is messy and unpredictable (Clark, 2000). Although not a guaranteed problem prevention technique, written agreements that identify the main project, or types of assignments, and the learning outcomes, as well as the obligations of the student, community organization and instructor can reduce somewhat the “messiness” and “unpredictability.” Even with this contractual agreement, product quality or the quality of the learning experience, is still unpredictable due to variations in student and client effort and background.

Research Needs

The present study summarized prior research into service learning and presented a summary of how one university administered its service learning program. However, there are many research questions that are left unanswered associated with the case and the literature review that should be subject to future research.

For example, both the literature review and the case discuss the need for enhancing service learning’s connection to promotion and tenure decisions and pay increases for faculty. What is missing in the research is how to politically and culturally shift universities (faculty, administrators, staff, and students) into making service learning a key aspect of university objectives that are important in tenure and promotion and pay raise decisions. This political and cultural shift may have to start with top leadership being committed to service learning. How much influence does top leadership have in the enhancement of service learning in a university? What are the most effective techniques to get service learning to become a major objective within a university? How can service learning be most effectively linked to the tenure and promotion process? How can service learning be most effectively linked to the pay raise process for faculty?

Related to the linkage of service learning to the overall objectives of the university is the relationship of the university to accreditation. In the present study, the university was accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Various accreditation organizations such as AACSB, Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), and the Northwest Accreditation Commission allow freedom of programming to some extent. The AACSB however provides some limitations in terms of the definition of who is academically qualified by specifically requiring certain degree levels and publication expectations (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2011). Future research needs to investigate how accreditation bodies affect the amount of service learning that is done at universities because of some of the research constraints imposed by these bodies.

The present study focused on the service learning format in which students get one extra credit for doing service learning off of a regular class. Is this service learning format more effective for learning than other service learning formats in which the service learning is actually part of the regular class? How much more effective is the service learning for students when it is optional than it is required for everyone in a class?

The present study focused on a service learning format in which only a few students did service learning in a class. Is this service learning format more effective for those learners rather than other formats in which the entire class is involved in service learning?

The present study included a Volunteer Expo recruiting effort in which professors and potential nonprofit clients could gather in a party atmosphere to discuss potential connections in future classes. Is this recruiting technique more effective than other techniques for getting nonprofit clients for professors e.g., former clients, newspapers, small business development centers, former students, or other sources?

Conclusion

The service learning lab option allows students to service nonprofit organizations, gives them a chance to reflect on their experiences, and provides them an opportunity to report their experiences through a written paper. But there are major administrative challenges associated with the lab option. The additional credit takes faculty time. University administration might not recognize this time is important because their strategic plan focuses more on research, service, or some other teaching goals. To help reduce problems associated with the service learning lab option, the service learning lab option must fit in the university strategic plan. Future research should investigate how individuals interested in enhancing service learning can politically and culturally shift the university in that direction.

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