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Service learning: What is it? Can we use it?

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I used to work for a Big Eight (now Big Six) Accounting firm. In addition to a tremendous amount of pro bono work that we did, the firm required all of its staff accountants, managers, and partners to become involved with one of the many not-for-profit organizations in the Cincinnati area.

The rationale was that each employee had an obligation to the greater community, to give something of himself or herself to others. And while I also heard that the "real" purpose of this requirement was "practice development" (translate marketing), there were certainly more likely places to network for "paying" clients. And we were in those places, too.

When I returned to academe a few years ago, I told my students about this firm's commitment to its community's citizens and how I believed that we would see more and more companies urging employees to volunteer time to social service agencies and cultural organizations. The notion seems to fit in an era of "societal marketing" and social responsibility. I also suggested that they begin to think about how they might be able to help. Most of them simply shrugged.

What I found typically, was students who were very self-centered. Not selfish, but self-centered. Their concerns were grades, classes, internships, career choices, social functions, athletics, and the like. A few were involved in volunteering. And while the majority felt that community service was important, they also felt that there was too little time and too many obligations to add something else.

I recalled the words of recruiters with whom I had spoken



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who talked about the importance of being "well-rounded." Did well-rounded include being involved in one's community? It certainly did to

my former employer. And it does to me as well. As a responsible educator, I believe that it is my obligation to broaden my students' awareness of themselves and the world in which they live.

I wondered if there was a way to incorporate this idea of community service into my classroom in a way that would be meaningful to students. Surely there were not-for-profit organizations in the community that would welcome help from business students and provide a forum for students to problem-solve real issues.

In a recent conversation with some colleagues, the term "service learning" came up. I had never heard the term until then, but it sounded exactly like what I was looking for. Service learning is a teaching method that provides students with the opportunity to integrate theory and experiences from the classroom with work experiences in a community service environment. It is experiential learning.

Proponents of service learning believe that students learn application of theory, new skills, critical thinking, cooperation, self-reliance, time management and planning, and new roles. They develop self-confidence. But perhaps more important, they learn that they have something of value to give to their community. They become active participants rather than passive observers of their world.

Service learning can be project-oriented, or it can be simply charity. Students could develop a

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Marketing Educator

mples. One can be very successful while continuing to be a d, caring person. Be excited by is, and always try to do qual- work when investigating them. tain an active program of olarship and research, and rest will take care of itself." ■

editor

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promotional campaign, or engage in some marketing research for organizations. Currently, I am working with an organization which is developing plans for a new museum. I anticipate getting my students involved in the planning process in some way. This would be project-oriented experience. Or, students could tutor high school students in business-oriented course work. Some schools in our area have asked for math, accounting, and computer science tutors. This would be considered charity.

An essential part of the process is the "self-reflection" that students are required to do as

part of a service learning experi- ence. This is where the "learn- ing" aspect is likely to take place. As students reflect upon what they have done, seen, heard, and found, they begin to relate that to their own lives in general and their course work specifically.

Service learning is interdis- ciplinary. It allows students to bring together ideas from all of their previous course work and experiences and use them to form the basis of new knowledge. I would like to bring students from varied disciplines together to work on projects. They will learn from and teach each other.

And service learning appears to be applicable to every area of study. Students in an English composition class wrote an anthology of children's books cele-

brating diversity. The project re- quired library research, written summaries of the various books, and essays on prejudice. The end result is being used by local ele- mentary school teachers. Stu- dents encountered their own feelings about diversity and prej- udice as part of their self-reflec- tion.

Not everyone I have encoun- tered is enamored with the idea. Some don't like the idea of forcing students into volunteering when volunteerism should be self-moti- vated. Others are concerned about how students are evaluat- ed. Others feel that this educa- tional philosophy is very political for it emphasizes charity.

I feel it offers a wonderful edu- cational opportunity for students and plan to use it at every oppor- tunity. ■

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