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Service Learning in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) Integrative Project Course: An Experience in China

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ABSTRACT. Service learning is a teaching method used by business faculty to link the learning goals and objectives of an academic course with meaningful community service. Although service learning has been advanced in business education in the United States and other Western countries, little has been reported on its use outside the Western context. In this article, the authors describe an experience with the introduction and implementation of a service-learning project in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program in south China. Preliminary feedback shows that students, faculty, and community partners have reported numerous benefits from the service-learning experience similar to those reported in the Western context.

Key words: China, management education, service learning

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Business faculty in the United States have begun to incorporate service learning educational experiences into a variety of coursework (Dahlquist, 1998; Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005; Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002a, 2002b; Klink & Athaide, 2004; Kohls, 1996). Although service learning is gaining momentum in business education in North America, little has been reported on the use of this pedagogical technique outside the Western context. On the basis of the growth of Master of Business Administration (MBA) education in China and the limited number of studies that have examined experiential instructional methodology in the context of China, we describe personal experiences with the introduction and use of service learning in an MBA integrative course in south China.

Service Learning in Business Education

Service learning has gained recognition as an effective and relevant pedagogy in business education in the United States (Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000). As described by other researchers (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002a; Klink & Athaide, 2004; Papamarcos, 2002), business educators have begun to embrace service learning in a variety of classes and sub-

ject areas. Service learning has been integrated into business school curricula, including accounting (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002a, 2002b; Still & Clayton, 2004), business ethics (Kohls, 1996), finance (Dahlquist, 1998; Philipot & Wright, 2002) and marketing (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Klink & Athaide, 2004). In addition, others (Godfrey & Grasso, 2000; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996; Lamb, Swinth, Vinton, & Lee, 1998) have described the effective implementation of service learning in leadership and management education.

In general, service learning is an experiential instructional approach that links the students' service to the community with the learning objectives of an academic course. Although there are many definitions of service learning, it is considered an inductive approach to education grounded in Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. Experiential learning involves a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, p. 38). As Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined service-learning, as "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity in such a way that meets identified community needs ... to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsi-

bility" (p. 222). Importantly, a major component of service learning is that students engage in reflection on their experiences, thereby linking them to the learning goals and objectives of the academic course (Kolenko et al., 1996). Thus, students actively participate in an organized service experience to meet a specific community need and, at the same time, the experience is integrated with the academic curriculum to provide students with the opportunity to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations (Waterman, 1997).

Numerous benefits of service learning have been described in the literature (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Rama et al., 2000; Zlotkowski, 1996). For example, Eyer and Giles provided a comprehensive review of research on service learning that demonstrates that it is associated with numerous positive student outcomes. Zlotkowski suggested that developing curricular projects that are linked to community needs expands the students' breadth of understanding. Thus, students have an appropriate balance between the internal focus of the classroom and the external business environment.

Service learning has been linked positively to leadership and communication skills, social responsibility, and mastery of discipline-specific material. Students participate in real-world problem solving and critical thinking to apply concepts and techniques that have been learned in the classroom. Tucker and McCarthy (2001) presented results to demonstrate the effectiveness of service learning in developing the communication skills of business students. In addition, service learning provides the community organizations with direct assistance in solving problems. Similarly, Easterling and Rudell (1997) point out that service learning benefits faculty and their educational institution. In particular, service learning may support the core values and mission of the university and provide faculty with valuable community contacts. With these numerous benefits that have been reported for using service learning in business education within the United States, we were interested in implementing service learning in a business course outside the Western context.

Western Influence on MBA Education in China

To a large extent, the worldwide growth of MBA education in recent years has been fueled by the growth occurring in China (Haight & Kwong, 2001; Hulme, 2004; Lee, 2002). As multinational companies enter China in record numbers and Chinese enterprises increasingly enter international markets, the MBA has become an attractive educational pursuit throughout China and especially in Beijing, Shanghai, and the south China region (Chinese lessons, 2004). At the same time, China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) has provided new management opportunities in a range of Chinese and multinational organizations involved in the country's emerging market economy. Consequently, there continues to be demand for graduate business education and qualified management talent in the Chinese business community (Jennings, 2001).

In response to this demand, many MBA programs are being offered throughout China. As the demand for business education has grown, several institutions in North America, Europe, and Australia are developing a presence in business education throughout China (Abdoolcarim, 1995; Haight & Kwong, 2001; Lee, 2002). For example, Chandler (2005) described the partnerships and alliances that Tsinghua University in Beijing has developed with American universities to model its MBA and executive MBA programs on Western institutions. Thus, as universities in China, North America, Europe and Australia deliver management education in China, pedagogical methods and approaches that have been utilized in the Western context are being implemented in the classrooms throughout China.

Given the widespread implementation of Western MBA education in China, researchers have begun to study pedagogical approaches that typically are used in the Western context to determine if the approaches provide effective learning experiences in China. For example, Whiteley (1995) studied the pedagogical issue of the relevance of Western business management literature to nonwestern management students in

Hong Kong. In another study, Thompson and Gui (2000) examined the reasons that executives chose to pursue an MBA to better understand the implications for program development. In an earlier study, Lee (1990) reported on an experience with teaching marketing research methodology in an executive MBA program in Hong Kong and made suggestions on the effective implementation of such a course. More recently, in examining the case study method, Liang and Wang (2004) conducted an empirical study of popular MBA cases in both the United States and China, and they proposed a way to develop better-balanced teaching cases to emphasize a more holistic approach to management education. Thus, researchers have begun to examine the instructional methodologies that are being used in MBA education in China.

Design and Implementation of the Service-Learning Project

Given the expected positive outcomes of service learning described by other researchers, we believed it was an appropriate pedagogy to consider for our capstone integrative project in an evening MBA program in south China. Through inclusion of a service-learning project, objectives focused the reinforcement of the functional and technical knowledge from the classroom, development of communication and interpersonal skills, practice of problem solving and critical-thinking skills, and engagement in community involvement.

The Setting: An Evening MBA Program in South China

Educational institutions in Macau, China's newest special administrative region, have responded to the challenges of the new business environment in the south China region (Campbell, 2000) by offering a variety of management education programs. The growing need for graduate business education in the business community has been met in part with the establishment of joint programs that are created in association with foreign universities and support of local authorities. As part of its mission, the MBA program is intended to provide an education in an intercultural

context of exchange between the East and West. The MBA curriculum is benchmarked to Western MBA degree programs and, at the same time, is tailored to the unique needs and demands of local businesses in Macau and the surrounding area. In tailoring the program to unique needs of the local business community, the program's creators recognize that service to the local business community is a key component of its mission. Thus, the incorporation of an integrative capstone project to include service to the community seemed appropriate to the mission and the curriculum learning objectives.

Creating the Integrative Service Learning Project

Students generally take the integrative capstone course during the last term of the regular academic program. Students should have previously completed core business courses enrolling in this course. The service-learning component of the course evolved from the need for students to demonstrate and use the skills through the participation in a real-world project. Objectives for the service-learning component of the project related to the course include: (a) enhance the understanding of how to identify problems and formulate alternative solutions, (b) practice skills associated with planning and implementing a defined project, (c) and improve written and verbal presentation skills. The instructors remind students from the beginning of the course that participation in a service learning project will allow them to see how managers acquire and apply knowledge about research to solve day-to-day problems, comprehend and utilize research reports, and analyze information more logically and systematically.

Course Content

The course is intended to prepare the students with a methodological framework that will be of long lasting value in their professional management careers. In most cases, students enter the course with little formalized knowledge on research design skills and tools. The course content focuses on preparing students to undertake a comprehensive

research project. During the course instructors introduce students to finding and using primary and secondary data; expose them to the logic and methods of survey research and other research methods; and ask them to incorporate the use of statistical methods to interpret the results of an empirical investigation. Finally, the course addresses the issues involved in organizing and presenting the findings of a business study.

Broadly, the course focuses on the process and practice of business research. Instructors give particular attention to the opportunities and challenges that managers and researchers face in applying research methods to the study of the local organizational and community issues. Students gain experience applying the principles and procedures that guide business researchers through participation in the community-based project.

Following the typical elements of a research project such as described by Cooper and Schindler (2003), students consider the methods and techniques of research and information gathering. Working with the faculty and organization liaison, the students define the scope of the project and establish the timeframe for completion. Students develop the research design and sampling considerations, conduct the data collection and analyses, and present their findings. Lastly, the written report prepared for the organization includes the recommendations and implementation strategies. In this way, students practice the typical stages involved in formulating and implementing an applied research project.

Identifying Project Opportunities

Before a project begins, a faculty member visits and investigates the project site to determine the appropriateness of the project for the course. The key criterion that is used in selection of a project is its link to the academic curriculum. At the beginning of the term, the instructor meets with the students to discuss the service-learning projects and the students' interests. Early in the term, as projects are determined, the instructor arranges a meeting with the student team and the organizational liai-

son. The instructor must invest the appropriate time necessary to develop the structure of the project and determine the mutual interests of the students and the organization. Also, the instructor is available to guide the project and guarantee progress throughout the term.

Team Selection and Planning

Effective team assignments are critical to the success of the integrative service-learning project. Faculty advisors take into consideration the interests and expertise of students when assigning a community-based project to the class. Student input is solicited and requests are honored to the extent possible. Teams are designated to include an appropriate representation of expertise, work experience, and skill base. Depending on the specific project, language fluency is a determinant in team and faculty assignments. Instruction for the MBA program is in English, but the predominant spoken languages in Macau are Cantonese and Portuguese. Typically, each team consists of four or five students working with the faculty advisor. Schedule availability is a consideration. The majority of students work full-time jobs while attending the evening MBA program. To accommodate the working student's schedule, the community-service project must be completed in a relatively short time and provide some flexibility in commitment to completion of the project. For example, it is common for students to devote up to 20 hrs per week during the eight-week duration of the project and often students work on the project during the weekend or evenings.

Developing the Applied Project

Students are required to work in a cross-functional project team to identify problems and issues facing a real community organization. As mentioned, the team is composed of four or five students who must apply knowledge from relevant areas of the curriculum. Students conduct a comprehensive analysis of the situation and develop a plan of action and recommendations for the organization by integrating the knowledge acquired in classes throughout the MBA curriculum. The project must be

sufficiently comprehensive to serve as a culminating integrative experience for the students as well as make a contribution to the community organization.

The applied project is designed as a team effort since decision making in organizations is rarely an individual activity. In response to students who may ask about doing the project on an individual basis, students are reminded that most of the work performed in an organizational setting depends on a collaborative effort of organizational members. As mentioned, students work with a faculty advisor and a liaison in the organization to complete the research project. Work on the team assignment is evaluated as a joint effort from the team members; that is, the project receives a grade that is assigned to all team members. Specific responsibilities of each team member are determined by the team in consultation with the faculty advisor on the basis of the scope and definition of the project.

Initially, students (as well as faculty and community organizations) are inclined to overlook the importance of setting milestones, establishing deadlines, and specifying clearly the scope of the project. Therefore, it is important to agree up front about the project's deliverables, timeframe and specific expectations. To keep the project on track, partners (students, faculty member and liaison) in the project are periodically reminded of the time constraints and regularly meet to assess the progress.

Service-Learning Project Example

Projects have been designed and implemented in a variety of community settings including hospitals, cultural sites, tourist destinations, charitable organizations, and trade associations. The service-learning projects were initiated in 2000 with about four projects added each year. A project undertaken with a trade association illustrates one example of the service-learning project. Students embarked on an active learning project to design and implement a study to provide information for a trade association representing small and medium enterprises. The trade association was interested in assessing the

strategic role it might play in improving opportunities for the small and medium-sized businesses in the southern China region. The trade union asked the team of students for assistance in formulating and implementing a survey to assess the role of the trade association in helping the small- and medium-business owners in the region.

In particular, the team wanted to provide suggestions on how to collect and analyze data to understand problems and challenges in the current business environment as perceived by small- and medium-business owners. Also, the team made recommendations on initiatives that the government and other institutions might undertake to enhance the business climate for small and medium enterprises. Using a research template, students worked with a faculty advisor to develop the background on the problem, define the research question as visualized by the trade association, develop a procedure for data collection, and determine the appropriate data analysis to be carried out. Because students were involved in each step of the process, they gained an understanding and appreciation of the research process. Through their involvement in the interpretation of findings and recommendations, students experienced a real-world application of the research tools and techniques learned in the MBA curriculum. Students became very involved in the project and worked to solidify their team's recommendations and verify that their conclusions were defensible. The project concluded with the presentation and written report delivered to both the instructor and the organization. Throughout the project, students reflected on the learning experience and its effectiveness in accomplishing the objectives of the course.

Reflection on the Lessons Learned From the Experience

Our partnership and involvement with the community in applied service-learning projects has resulted in numerous benefits for the students, the community leaders, and faculty. Each time the course is taught, we receive valuable suggestions on ways to continuously improve the project. At the beginning of the term,

it is important that students are introduced to the project and relate the knowledge learned in the courses to the relevant applications in the project. Students should understand early that the service-learning segment of the course involves work outside the classroom. Also, the development of a service-learning project requires extensive planning on the part of the instructor. Based on an analysis of the feedback from students, faculty and community leaders, we describe several benefits and challenges from the service-learning experience.

Student Feedback

Students generally describe the benefits of the project in terms of both tangible and intangible results. At the beginning of the assignment, students report that they often felt overwhelmed by the ambiguity and scope of the project. In feedback sessions, students admit that they felt frustrated or apprehensive about the prospect of being capable or having the expertise to complete the project. After the completion of the project, however, students reflect on the experience in a positive way and acknowledge the value of the learning experience.

In the end-of-course formal evaluations, results have shown that the students see the direct connection of the project to course material and appreciate the contribution that their team made to the local community and region. Students have rated the experience positively in terms of improving analytical ability, understanding the research process and preparation of proposals, refining written and oral communication skills, synthesizing their business knowledge to solve a real-world problem, and improving team skills. In informal feedback with the instructor, students report that the project has helped them to gain an understanding of community responsibility, to develop competence in business decision making, to improve interpersonal and team skills, and to improve their written and presentation skills.

Community Feedback

Organizations that have agreed to participate in the service-learning projects

have reported favorable reactions to the quality of the students' work and the contributions that the students have made to their organization. In response to the presentations and written reports, the organizations provide positive comments about the professionalism of the students and the students' knowledge. Some organizations that have participated in the projects have been reluctant to share information, which limits the scope of a project. For the same reason, some organizations have not been interested in hosting a service-learning project.

Given the limited number of projects to date, the process of developing and maintaining partnerships with community organizations and leaders is an ongoing process. The successful completion of each project is important to gain opportunities for the next project. In organizations where projects have been completed more than once, feedback on the quality of the projects continues to be positive. For example, the trade association has sponsored three student projects in subsequent semesters. The student members of the team, the organizational liaison, and the faculty advisor working on the projects have viewed the experience in a positive way. The trade association indicated that the students' work has provided valuable information that has been utilized in decision making.

One suggestion that came from an organizational sponsor of a project is that, as awareness spreads, local organizations will be more receptive to participation. Outreach from the educational institution is ongoing. For example, faculty members speak in public service forums or accept invitations to local organizations to describe the service-learning opportunities and seek partnerships with local community organizations.

Faculty Feedback

Faculty feedback on the community-based projects is generally positive. Faculty members have seen the projects as providing an opportunity to expand the learning environment outside the classroom, to foster community relationships for the educational institution, and incorporate relevant examples in the course. To maintain these early successes with

the service-learning projects, however, several issues must be addressed as the course evolves. For example, it is necessary to continually develop sources and identify ideas for appropriate projects. Because the projects are time consuming, faculty members may hesitate to use this experiential approach. However, they have shown interest and enthusiasm in the service-learning projects.

Thus, early assessments and feedback from the perspective of students, faculty members, and community leaders have indicated that there are numerous benefits and challenges for implementing the service-learning project. Our experience using the approach in the MBA integrative course in China is in the early stages of development. Nevertheless, positive learning outcomes and benefits are similar to those reported in the Western context.

DISCUSSION

Building upon and extending previous research, this project contributes to the existing literature on service learning in business education in several ways. This article is one of the first to describe the benefits and challenges of implementing a service-learning project in the context of management education in China. In our experiences with service learning, students found the active involvement to be worthwhile and it helped them to understand and retain the material taught in the classroom. These impressions are consistent with other researchers who have looked at Chinese students' reaction to active pedagogical methods of instruction. For example, in a study of Chinese MBA students in Beijing, Thompson (2000) found that Chinese students regard active pedagogical methods of instruction such as cases, small group discussion, and real-world examples to be more useful than the less participative and passive pedagogical approaches such as lectures and videos. In addition, we agree with Papamarcos (2002) that the integrative team-based approach for service learning is an effective extension of the individualized experience. Assuming the advantages of active learning approaches, the incorporation of a service-learning project provides an

opportunity for students to develop analytical and problem-solving skills through a real-world example.

Businesses throughout China seek to recruit managers and employees who possess such analytical and problem-solving skills and who are capable of immediately adding value to a company. Studies have shown that CEOs want MBA graduates to be strong in analytical and strategic skills, critical thinking and leadership (Abdoolcarim, 1995). Service learning provides the opportunity for students to develop these skills. As others (Thompson, 2000; Thompson & Gui, 2000) have noted, there is growing interest in understanding which pedagogical approaches are most effective and appropriate to develop such skills in Chinese business students. Service-learning projects provide one way to enhance skills and provide practical relevant real-world experiences that are valued in the business community.

Another reason to consider service learning is that it is useful in contributing to the mission of the program. In our example, the mission of the MBA program includes engagement in service activities to the southern China business community. Furthermore, the mission conveys the commitment of the institution to develop a core set of skills in the students that are valuable to potential employers. The service-learning experience is conducive to helping students accomplish the learning objectives of the course, while simultaneously contributing to the community and fulfilling the mission.

Our experience with the service-learning project has provided only preliminary results. To a large extent, the study reported here is exploratory. Additional research is needed on the effectiveness of the service learning approach in business education in China. As Thompson and Gui (2000) recommended, comparative research is needed to examine MBA education in China more closely and to study the effectiveness of various pedagogical techniques. In looking at the growth of foreign management education programs in China, Lau and Roffey (2002) drew attention to the need for more research as to the effectiveness of "imported" management education pro-

grams in China. As graduate management education in China develops and evolves, the influence and effectiveness of Western business education should be examined more systematically. Thus, it is important to explore in more detail the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches such as service learning.

The demand for trained managers and business leaders is expected to remain strong as China's businesses face an increasingly information-based and global business environment (Chinese lessons, 2004). The Shanghai Education Commission estimated that China would need more than 37,000 MBAs by 2006 (Hulme, 2004). As the demand for graduate business education in China develops and evolves, business educators must continue to be interested in the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches that are being adopted by Western management education system.

Service learning provides an opportunity for students to link academic knowledge and real-world experience. In addition, students benefit from the realization that their contributions are valued by the organization. As Pound and Moore (2004) point out, there is increasing recognition in public and private sectors that corporations need to promote employee volunteerism. Students who have experienced the value of service learning firsthand may be inclined to carry that experience into the organizations in which they are employed.

Therefore, we recommend that others consider the use of service learning in their management education programs in China. Our experiences demonstrate, on a small scale, that the service-learning experience positively complements the traditional classroom experience. We believe that implementation of an integrative service-learning project helps to fulfill multiple learning objectives and provides several advantages to enhance the learning experience of students. It provides a relevant and realistic context for students to apply concepts that they have learned throughout the curriculum and strengthen leadership and communication skills. At the same time, the experience provides valuable advice and

recommendations for community organizations that have agreed to participate in the exchange. Also, business faculty benefit from the opportunity to foster community relationships, expand the learning environment outside the classroom, and bring relevant examples back to the classroom. Although we illustrated service learning in an integrative capstone course, the development and implementation of a service-learning initiative might be of interest to business faculty teaching other business courses in China.

NOTE

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