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Collaborative Service Learning: A Winning Proposition for Industry and Education

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Companies seek employees who have the potential to devise and initiate innovative solutions to complex industry problems, not students who excel in rote memorization and regurgitation. To prepare students to succeed in an increasingly diverse and competitive marketplace, it is necessary to engage students in higher levels of learning. Educators across the nation have realized that effective teaching moves students beyond basic understanding of material to integrating experiences into practice (Granello, 2001). Service learning is an effective teaching tool that promotes higher levels of learning, and simultaneously links students' academic and career goals with service to the community (Brown, 2000).

SERVICE LEARNING

The goal of service learning is to provide a benefit to the industry that enhances student learning, and likewise, the student learning enhances the service provided (Rudell, 1996; Thomas & Landau, 2002). The service-learning framework engages students by integrating an active, structured, and team-based approach to problem solving (Papamarcos, 2002). Examples of such projects include creating universal designs for elder-care facilities (Sterling, 2004), merchandising a Salvation Army thrift store (Paulins, 1999), teaching basic sewing skills to individuals who are blind (MacDonald, 1994), analyzing economic data for planning and zoning commissions (Anderson & Sungur, 1999), designing promotional materials for a nonprofit agency (Graves, 2001), or planning a public relations event for a nursing home or orphanage (Stevens, 2001). Although a majority of the literature focuses on service learning within the context of nonprofit organizations, the basic concepts have direct applications to other business entities such as retailers.

The effectiveness of service learning has been well documented in academic settings through anecdotal evidence (Alexander, 2001; Brown, 2000; Morton & Troppe, 1996; Papamarcos, 2002; Rehling, 2000; Rudell, 1996; Stevens, 2001; Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998). Proponents suggest that service learning connects real-life problems and academic concepts and contributes to lasting learning (Kohls, 1996). Specific competitive advantages include enriching student's skill base, reinforcing classroom content, expanding students' attention beyond the classroom, and providing students with the opportunity to participate in the university's outreach efforts (Tucker et al., 1998). Direct benefits to the service provider include increased knowledge and awareness among associates, better understanding of needs and opportunities, and innovative solutions to complex problems. Additionally, the service provider has the benefit of working with interested and engaged students, thus, expanding their network for potential employees (Alexander, 2001).

Beyond anecdotal evidence, there is a growing body of literature that empirically validates the benefits of service learning (Boss, 1994; Marcus, Howard, & King, 1993; Paulins, 1999). Marcus et al. (1993) compared students in service-learning sections versus traditional discussion sections of a political science course, and found that students' academic learning was significantly enhanced by the completion of a community service project. Boss (1994) compared students enrolled in two sections of an undergraduate ethics course and found that the class engaged in community service had a slightly better understanding of the course content than students who did not complete a service project. Additionally, results showed that students who experienced service learning had significantly higher scores in moral reasoning than their non-service learning counterparts.

Family and consumer sciences (FCS) educators are no strangers to service-learning partnerships (MacDonald, 1994; Paulins, 1999; Sterling, 2004). Paulins conducted pretest and posttest surveys to determine the value of service learning

to students enrolled in an FCS core course. Based on the results, students who had completed a service-learning project were more aware of their roles as members of a community and they learned course content effectively through reinforcement of concepts, issues, and themes. However, retail merchandising students did not expect to perform service activities in their chosen careers. Paulins suggested that merchandising educators should include service-learning activities as a part of their ongoing curriculum. This would help students make the transition into the workforce, where community involvement is increasingly valued and expected.

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

A national specialty apparel retailer made a formal request to collaborate with the university for a service-learning project focusing on product knowledge training. The retailer conducted an internal survey among sales associates to solicit innovative ideas for more effectively serving customers. Based on survey results, sales associates indicated that they needed in-depth education in specific merchandise categories such as textiles. The collaborative partnership was timed to occur between the back-to-school and pre-holiday shopping seasons. Thus, store management determined that a product knowledge seminar on two of the most important gift-giving items-leather and cashmere-would be advantageous.

The service-learning project was presented to the merchandising faculty to determine the feasibility, benefits, and potential disadvantages of the project. According to Alexander (2001), service-learning projects should be challenging, appropriate for the class, realistic, and of significant value to both the industry partner and students. Based on these recommendations, the decision was made that the long-term benefits of the collaborative effort would be a worthwhile experience for both retailers and students.

The decision was made to implement the service-learning project in an advanced merchandising applications course. The capstone course serves as a real-world case study of merchandising theory, principles, and practices with an emphasis on problem solving, case analysis, creative thinking, data analysis, and data interpretation. Enrollment is open to both upper-level undergraduate and graduate students. The primary objectives of the course are to: (a) engage students' critical thinking skills through the application of classroom theories and principles to an industry situation; (b) develop interpersonal skills required to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings within group projects; and (c) to use a variety of perspectives to solve retail problems.

The case study analysis approach is the primary pedagogical tool used for the course. However, additional projects with an industry focus are undertaken, depending on the nature of project and the learning preferences of the students enrolled in the course. Papamarcos (2002) suggested that students who are motivated, flexible, and willing to negotiate are better candidates for service-learning endeavors than students who require well-ordered, highly structured assignments. Fortuitously, all students enrolled in the advanced merchandising class identified themselves as the former type of student and were excited about the opportunity to collaborate with industry.

Service-learning projects are inherently designed to introduce a certain level of uncertainty for the instructor, the students, and the industry participants. To avoid frustration and underachievement, service-learning projects should be narrowly described with clear boundaries as to scope and specific goals (Papamarcos, 2002). Before the semester started, the supervising faculty member met individually with the retailer to establish the broad parameters of the project, define the specific goals for successful accomplishment, and identify target dates. The project was developed, implemented, and evaluated during a 16-week semester.

Project Initiation (Weeks 1-3)

A key to the effectiveness of this project was transferring responsibility from the instructor to students. As a leadership technique, transference purposefully shifts responsibility for work and performance from the faculty member to the student ("Transference," 2002). A basic underlying premise of transference is that an instructor can instill in students self-motivating attitudes and behaviors and help them develop a strong sense of ownership of their academic pursuits.

For example, the unstructured format of the project allowed each student to take active leadership roles, effectively set goals for each class meeting, and ultimately create the product knowledge seminar. Unlike traditional classroom projects, the success of service-learning projects relies on students' initiative rather than direct instruction from the faculty. This philosophy was presented and discussed with students during the first class meetings.

A student-led brainstorming session identified two areas of preparation that were necessary: (a) knowledge about the company and (b) knowledge about the products. The action plan devised included studying and observing company operations, obtaining detailed information about the products, and consulting with knowledgeable professionals. The overriding goal was to present a relevant, informative, and professional seminar on leather and cashmere that exceeded the retailers' expectations.

Project Development (Weeks 4-10)

Each student completed a literature search, seeking relevant information about the company (e.g., policies, service philosophy, core values) and specific merchandise information (e.g., fiber properties, textile developments, care guidelines, labeling definitions). To gain a better understanding of the corporate culture, graduate students read a book written about the company and completed a brief, two-page review. Numerous site visits were made to the retailer to familiarize students with merchandise selection and key suppliers. Additional data collection included a field study tour to a specialty leather retailer that highlighted characteristics of specific skins and garment quality. Students conducted telephone interviews with both buyers and manufacturing representatives to gain information about specific manufacturing processes, product information, and warranty guarantees. An important step in the preparation was to attend a special product seminar given by the retailer's corporate product development group.

During the next phase, each student submitted a sample template for the seminar with a general outline of content. Students reviewed the templates and mapped the presentation via consensus building. The seminar was pilot tested using an undergraduate merchandising course that focuses on apparel quality. The convenience sample was selected because of the direct application of the presentation to their course objectives. Students provided evaluative feedback concerning the multimedia presentation and delivery methods. Revisions to the presentation were made after all suggestions were considered and a consensus reached.

Project Implementation (Weeks 11-12)

The product knowledge seminar was presented to approximately 40 employees, including department managers and sales associates. The seminar was delivered during a regularly scheduled sales meeting held before the store opening. Information packets (i.e., presentation slides, speaker notes) were given to the participants with the intent that they would distribute the information to all the employees. Additional packets that contained the presentation on CD-ROM were distributed to other stores in the chain throughout the local area.

Students submitted a final report as the culmination of the project. This document detailed the development, implementation, and evaluation of the project. Final copies of the report were distributed to the service provider, merchandising faculty, and university administrators.

Project Evaluation (Weeks 13-15)

To describe the overall effectiveness of the project, evaluative feedback was collected from seminar participants, students, and the supervising faculty member. The intent of the evaluation process was to identify relevant themes and determine if the collaborative project helped students in achieving the stated learning outcomes.

Company Feedback. At the conclusion of the seminar, participants were asked to complete a survey rating items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Respondents indicated the seminar met their expectations ($M = 4.77$), provided useful handouts and visual aids ($M = 4.97$), added to their professional growth ($M =$

4.76), and increased their competence to deal with topics in the workplace ($M = 4.57$). Overwhelmingly, respondents shared that the presenters were well informed and provided good examples ($M = 4.90$).

Seventy-three (73) percent of the participants ($n = 29$) responded to an open-ended question that solicited information about the effectiveness of the seminar. A content analysis of written comments identified two important themes: product knowledge and job performance. Product knowledge was supported by comments such as "I learned exactly what my associates wanted to know regarding the merchandise we recently received." Comments such as "I feel much more confident in selling products as a result of this seminar" and "knowledge does help me sell because people trust your opinions" related to job performance. One participant commented that "based on my personal experiences, sales associates' knowledge significantly impacts customers' final purchase decisions."

As evidenced by respondent comments, participants found the information was a value-added service provided to the retailer. It was apparent that participants welcomed the intimate atmosphere created during the seminar as many were engaged with questions and comments. This could be attributed to the preliminary work that students had completed to familiarize themselves with the corporate culture and general "buzz" words used in the retail organization. Additional suggestions regarding product information for additional categories (e.g., handbags, socks, scarves) were noted for future seminars.

Student Feedback. Students were asked to reflect upon their learning experience and submit a written self-assessment. This reflective process was further enhanced when students shared their personal evaluations with each other during a class meeting. Students collectively determined four key benefits of service learning including: teamwork, personal responsibility, problem-solving abilities, and networking opportunities. A positive outcome of the project was the development of a strong triangular relationship among faculty, students, and the retailer. Unlike the traditional learning experience in which students often feel disconnected from their peers, this project strengthened relationships and built camaraderie through teamwork. Students assumed personal responsibility for project completion as evidenced by one student's comment, "the success of the project was the result of team members bringing their best to the table and delivering on their promises." Students also perceived that the service-learning approach allowed them to focus directly on the problem, apply the suggested solution, and gain feedback from the experience. According to one student, "this project gave us opportunities to solve problems which traditional textbooks cannot provide." Additional benefits identified by the students were the networking opportunities to meet industry professionals as they interacted with the product development group, buyers, vendors, and sales associates.

Faculty Feedback. The faculty assessed student performance based on a predetermined grade criteria, which was distributed to students after the broad parameters for the project had been determined. Comments were categorized in three themes: research skills, interpersonal communication, and student initiative. First, students developed extensive product knowledge with a special merchandise category (i.e., leather and cashmere). To this end, students' research skills were strengthened as they completed literature searches, book reviews, telephone and personal interviews, and observational data collection.

Another outcome was the enhancement of students' interpersonal communication skills. Students were required to delegate, organize, and communicate effectively, and develop and deliver a presentation. In group sessions, students listened to opposing opinions, defended their ideas, and negotiated a final decision. For example, there was lively debate over the general appearance of the presentation template. Some students had strong opinions regarding the professionalism of the presentation and others felt strongly that the presentation should be dynamic with multiple graphic images and animation. From an instructor's perspective, students exhibited both self-motivating and self-monitoring behaviors in their proactive approach to reaching an agreement and completing the project.

Students were introspective as they articulated their perceived strengths and weaknesses as a contributing member of the team and this affected how tasks were delegated and often accepted. The primary role of the instructor was to serve as the liaison between the class and retailer and provide general direction to students regarding the project objectives. The instructor served as the "guide on the side" by keeping students accountable for project outcomes. This required

students to demonstrate personal initiative in making appointments with buyers, setting up interviews, and securing fabric swatches with vendors. Many of the students were interested in employment opportunities with this particular company, and recognized the importance of making a strong, positive impression. Based on the evaluative feedback from seminar participants, students, and the supervising faculty, it was evident that the learning objectives for the course had been successfully met.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

Although the application of service learning occurred within a retail organization, the concept could be utilized in other corporate settings and across other FCS disciplines. One recommendation would be to modify the seminar for other retailers (i.e., specialty chain stores, department stores). As many retailers transfer their training to a computer format, a logical progression would be to package the information in a Web-based module. The seminars could be expanded to include other textile categories as well as areas that do not relate directly to product (e.g., customer relations, team-building, interpersonal communication skills). case studies involving longitudinal studies could be incorporated as a part of the regular curriculum. This type of project could be an integral part of a university's retail education center that supports outreach efforts in research and knowledge dissemination to the industry (e.g., research on consumer perceptions, customer loyalty, demographic and psychographic studies of target markets).

As with any learning activity, modifications and improvements are necessary. For future service-learning projects, the evaluation of learning outcomes should be formalized (Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996). Expectations regarding class readings, realistic time commitments, project outcomes and grading criteria must be explicit so that both the instructor and students are clear on assessment procedures. Successful learning projects also are based on direct communication among all parties involved (Alexander, 2001). Increased dialogue with store management during the development phase of the presentation could have provided additional insight into the training needs (e.g., other product categories). Focus groups with sales associates would have been another useful tool for gathering data because these individuals represent the front-line employee who has direct access to the customer.

Collaboration between industry and academia creates a win-win situation for students, retailers, and the university. Through innovative partnering, such as the product knowledge seminar, students may become more competitive in the job market with greater potential for success. From an educator viewpoint, these partnerships can increase program visibility and attract new students. Finally, the service provider directly benefits from receiving innovative solutions while interacting with a rich pool of talented students.

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