

Theory-to-Practice

Leveraging the Diverse Skills of Nontraditional Students in Service-Learning Projects

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Abstract

The simultaneous higher education growth trends of nontraditional students and service-learning encourages discussion of the efficient use of student talent. This study documents the methods and results of introducing service-learning into a capstone business course at a regional campus of a state university, comprised entirely of nontraditional students. Due to the small class sizes and restricted academic opportunities of the regional campus, student assignment decisions were based on work experience and personal preference rather than academic major. The results indicated that these methods were effective, broadening the students' academic experience, providing worthwhile community service, and ultimately influencing curricular changes.

Introduction

Student demographics have been changing on college campuses for many years, and pedagogy should be changing to reflect the most efficient methods of teaching the current target population. The state university involved in this study has an enrollment of over 40,000 students, however approximately 14,000 of these students attend one of seven regional campuses. These regional campuses are typical with regard to smaller class size and more restricted academic opportunities in comparison to their main campus counterpart. Educators at regional campuses face unique problems if they intend to introduce service-learning into their courses. The type of community partner chosen and the scope of the project can be greatly restricted if the students involved are small in number and limited in academic diversity.

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One of the keys to addressing such concerns is to recognize the hidden skills of the students and utilize these skills to their fullest potential. Researchers have outlined methods for introducing service-learning into course curriculum, but these efforts often fail to fully leverage the considerable skills of the students in the classroom (Papamarcos, 2005). This study documents the methods and outcomes of assigning four classes of nontraditional business students at a regional campus of a state university to four service-learning projects.

Literature Review

Nontraditional Students

The percentage of college students categorized as nontraditional is growing (Bennett, Evans, & Reidle, 2007; Hoyt, Howell, Touchet, Young, & Wygant, 2010), although few scholars have given them much attention (Chao & Good, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2002) profiles traditional students as dependents between 18 and 23 years of age. Alternative characteristics used by various researchers include part-time academic status, single parenthood, having dependents, working at least 35 hours a week, delayed college enrollment, and failure to receive a high school diploma (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996). Nontraditional students have become a significant factor at four-year colleges and universities, many of which have regional campuses that operate on an open-enrollment basis with fewer admission criteria (Walleri, 1989). It is not surprising that the regional campuses of a university traditionally enroll a larger percentage of nontraditional students than the main campus (Lavin & Crook, 1990).

In 1970, 28 percent of people in higher education were 25 years old and older. By 2004 that figure had risen to 39 percent (Lane, 2004). Student age has been shown to affect learning styles, as older students described their ideal instructors and courses as those that were more rigorous, more serious, and more readily applicable to the real world (Strage, 2008). Nontraditional students have less focus on instructor communication style and more focus on self-direction, practical application, and experiential learning than traditional students (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Gorham, 1999; Landrum, McAdams, & Hood, 2000; Pollio & Beck, 2000). Although grades have been found to be important to all types of students, nontraditional students are more concerned with what they can do with the knowledge they receive in a class (Jinkens, 2009). Nontraditional students have a significantly high-

er learning orientation, lower performance orientation (Eppler, Carsen-Plentl, & Harju, 2000), and higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Nontraditional students also have a greater number of stressors due to added responsibilities outside of school (Dill & Henley, 1998).

The employment status of students is an important consideration when analyzing learning methods. In 1979, 25 percent of American undergraduate students were working full-time. By 2004, this figure had risen to 40 percent (Lane, 2004). Workload can have a negative effect on academic success, as a student's financial need to work has been shown to have an adverse effect on learning (National Audit Office [NAO], 2002). While the workload requirements of nontraditional students have been shown to negatively impact some aspects of the educational experience, other areas of coursework may benefit from real-life work experience.

Experiential Learning

One of the educational considerations of nontraditional students is that they actively seek alternative modes of curriculum delivery (Skopek & Schuhmann, 2008). These alternatives include experiential learning, as nontraditional students would rather participate than be lectured to. The growing number of nontraditional students, coupled with the fact that these students are requesting alternative educational experiences, is a contributing factor to the steady increase of experiential learning requirements within course curriculum (Kenworthy-U'ren & Peterson, 2005).

The pedagogy used by American higher education traditionally includes the use of textbooks, lectures, theoretical discussions, case studies, and formal examinations. Critiques of this system question a lack of the application of such knowledge to the real world. Early research indicated that business schools were failing to realistically portray organizational life (Quillen, 1993), resulting in graduates who are knowledgeable of theory yet unable to meaningfully contribute in practice (Bailey & Ford, 1996). By 2006 the United States Department of Education reported a growing public demand for increased accountability of learning outcomes in undergraduate programs.

A common response to such deficiencies is the use of internships, which expose students to experiences that cannot be taught in the classroom (Barr & McNeilly, 2002). A 2001 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers revealed that 93 percent of respondent institutions offered internship programs (Steffes, 2004). Internship pro-

grams have been shown to have many positive outcomes such as helping students determine appropriate career paths, giving participants early career advantages over other students (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000), and exposing students to new career opportunities (Steffes, 2004).

A problem often associated with internships is that they are largely confined to traditional students, as many nontraditional students do not have the luxury of rearranging their personal lives for an entire quarter or semester in order to participate in a full-time internship experience. This may be due to employment responsibilities, monetary considerations, or family-life time constraints. One alternative to full-time internship programs is service-learning.

Service-learning is a popular type of experiential learning. It has grown exponentially over the past two decades and can be found at all levels of education, including public and private universities, both secular and non-secular in nature, from all corners of the world (Kenworthy-U'ren & Peterson, 2005). Described as a remedy for American higher education's failure to cultivate a public conscience or link students to the consequences of their decisions in the lives of others (Dipadova-Stocks, 2005), service-learning encourages students to give back to the community and enhances their understanding of and commitment to their civic responsibilities (Papamarcos, 2005; Steiner & Watson, 2006). Service-learning may be the most meaningful educational experience available to some students (Papamarcos, 2005), providing a connected view of learning that integrates their real world experiences with classroom lectures and discussion, creating a powerful learning environment (Steffes, 2004). Business students involved in service-learning move from theory into application from learning about management in the relatively safe confines of the classroom to learning from the application of such concepts in the real world (Salimbene, Buonon, LaFarge, & Nurick, 2005; Govekar & Rishi, 2007).

Early research found that national policy makers and community organizations proclaimed that civic responsibility, civic participation, and citizenship were at the heart of service-learning, but these three goals were not commonly reinforced at the course level (Smith, 1994). As a result, business educators began using service-learning as a teaching strategy that provides students with a context in which to develop managerial skill sets (Godfrey & Grasso, 2000; Kenworthy-U'ren, 2000; Tucker & McCarthy, 2001; Vega, 2007) and apply management techniques to social problems (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005). Service-learning can take

many forms and therefore be offered in many different courses across a wide range of business subjects (Andrews, 2007).

Methodology

The Regional Campus

The campus involved in this article is located on the edge of a small metropolitan area in an otherwise rural county. The absence of student housing necessitates that all students commute to school. Although the student body consists of approximately 2,400 students, less than 150 are enrolled in the College of Business. Most of these students are management majors due largely to the fact that it is the only business program offered in its entirety at the regional campus. Students enrolled in other business majors must drive for over an hour to the main campus for the specific courses required in those fields.

Regional campuses traditionally fill various roles, one of which is that of a policy instrument for local community needs (Charles, 2007). The campus administration announced the introduction of a formal service-learning program a few years ago, encouraging community organizations and instructors to voluntarily become involved. This study documents the implementation of service-learning into four consecutive offerings of a course called *Integrated Business Policy and Strategy*, the capstone course required at the end of the baccalaureate degree program for all College of Business students. The course was a logical choice for three reasons: (1) the successful use of service-learning in a capstone business course had been previously documented (Govekar & Rishi, 2007); (2) the regional campus business students did not have prior experiential learning opportunities; and (3) as graduating seniors, the students were more thoroughly prepared to contribute to the project than they would have been earlier in their academic careers.

Service-learning projects are typically run within the bounds of the non-profit world (Kenworthy-U'ren & Peterson, 2005); however, an old assumption has been that the best service-learning placements for business students would be in local businesses. Rehling (2000) disagreed, finding that placements in nonprofit organizations often provide the same transitory benefits as those in industry. The acceptance by the local community that senior-level business students could use their talents for the benefit of local organizations has grown steadily since the program was introduced. The community partners used in this study were the Ameri-

can Red Cross, a young women's transition home, Habitat for Humanity, and the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

Data Collection

Students were given a Student Information Form to complete during the first class of the semester with the understanding that the information would remain confidential to the instructor and would only be used within the confines of the course. The reason for the form was that some of the information, such as employment history, was not available in traditional academic files. This simple one-sheet form provided an efficient method for the instructor to get to know the students better and also provided a guide for the students when they introduced themselves to the entire class during the first session.

Additional personal student information was collected through traditional academic records. This data, although useful for the purpose of this research, was not deemed appropriate to be collected in an open classroom setting or revealed to the entire class during the introductory session. These items were student age and gender.

The Students

An analysis of the demographics of the 62 students in the four classes provided the impetus for establishing an efficient method of utilizing the students in the service-learning projects. Differentiation by gender revealed a 55/45 split between males and females, comparable to norms within business schools. Students that worked full time constituted 47 percent of the students, 47 percent worked part-time (under 40 hours per week), and 6 percent of the students did not work while enrolled in the course. The average age of the students was 31 years, with full-time working students being slightly older (average 33 years old) than part-time working students (average 28 years old), or non-working students (average 26 years old). Students who worked full-time took less academic load (average 7.9 hours) than those who worked part-time (average 12.4 hours), or were not working (average 14.2 hours). A summary of student demographics can be found in Table 1.

The most noteworthy student demographic in regard to this study was that of academic major. Almost three-fourths of the students in the study were management majors and a majority of the remaining students were accounting majors. There was only one student majoring in each of the areas of finance, marketing, information technology, and economics

Table 1
Regional Campus Student Demographics

	Employment Status of Students			Total	
	Full-time	Part-time	Unemployed	Number	%
Gender					
Male	15	17	2	34	54.8
Female	14	12	2	28	45.2
Total	29	29	4	62	
Average Age	32.7	28.3	26.3	30.7	
Academic Load					
Hours	7.9	12.4	14.2	10.4	
Major					
Management	23	18	4	45	72.6
Accounting	5	8	0	13	21.0
Finance	0	1	0	1	1.6
Marketing	1	0	0	1	1.6
Info Tech	0	1	0	1	1.6
Economics	0	1	0	1	1.6

involved in the study. These four students were dispersed between the four classes. During the same period, the nearly 3,000 College of Business students at the main campus were comprised of only 28 percent management majors. The main campus had a significantly larger percentage of finance, marketing, information technology, economics, and entrepreneurship majors than were present at the regional campus. Both campuses had approximately the same percentage of Accounting majors. Table 2 depicts the marked difference between the regional campus and the main campus in regard to the major of the business students.

The Process

The success of a service-learning project is largely dependent on the faculty member's ability to identify the needs of both the service providers (e.g., students) and the community partner, contributing to the design of a program more likely to produce the desired outcome (Zhang, Zeller,

Table 2
Academic Major by Campus

Academic Major	Main Campus*	Regional Campus**
Management	28.3%	72.6%
Accounting	20.4%	21.0%
Finance	14.0%	1.6%
Marketing	12.6%	1.6%
Information Technology	7.0%	1.6%
Economics	4.0%	1.6%
Entrepreneurship	3.9%	0
Other	9.7%	0

* Based on 2,935 College of Business students

** Based on 62 students in 4 classes

Griffith, Metcalf, Williams, Shea, & Misulis, 2011). Program design answers the question of “How should it be done?” This is the second component of Stufflebeam’s (2003) Context, Input, Process, and Product Evaluation Model (CIPP), which is widely used to assess service-learning programs.

A key issue in program design is matching the students with the specific requirements of the project. A commonly-accepted matching method is based on academic major: marketing students work on advertising, accounting and finance majors handle the books, management majors tackle the planning issues, etc. This type of assignment technique was not practical at the regional campus for two reasons: (1) the distribution of student majors was so heavily skewed toward management that many classes contained no marketing, economics, finance, or information technology majors; and (2) the nontraditional students’ strongest contributory skills in the classroom may be more indicative of their work experiences and personal interests than the restricted choices of academic majors available at the regional campus.

The information contained on the Student Information Form and the personal introduction of each student during the first class period was quite revealing. Although there was little diversity in the class from an academic major perspective, there was a great deal of diversity in regard to work experiences and fields of interests. It became apparent that the

restrictive academic opportunities of the regional campus had a significant influence on the academic major chosen by many of the students.

The three semester-hour class met one evening a week. Key personnel from the community partner met with the class during the second week of the semester. This provided the opportunity for all parties to meet in person, put a face to previously-distributed contact names, and participate in detailed discussions. A storyboard session was conducted to identify the potential needs of the community partner and summarize them into three or four logical categories for eventual team assignments.

The summarized categories of community partner needs were listed on a form by the instructor and distributed individually to each student. The students indicated which portion of the project they preferred to be involved with by ranking them on the form. These student preferences, along with the student background information gathered at the beginning of the semester, were used by the instructor to place the students into appropriate teams. The process of matching the needs of the community partner to the personal choices of the students proved to be less of an issue than anticipated. Sixty-one percent of the students were placed in their first group of choice and the remaining students were placed in their second choice. None of the students were placed in the third or fourth available choices or what they indicated as their least-desired portion of the project. The diversity of the students' work experience and personal choices created placement options quite different than those based on academic major.

Results

The success of this service learning program can be documented in the effects that it had on both the community partners and the students. The growing interest in service-learning throughout the academic community, coupled with the success of service-learning programs like the one documented in this study, contributed to a change in the curriculum of the College of Business.

An ambitious course schedule was undertaken so the textbook contents were reviewed and all testing completed during the first ten weeks of the semester. Each team of students worked on their portion of the project independently during this time, with weekly class discussions to review progress. The last five weeks of the semester were used to coordinate the work of the multiple teams into a seamless final product. Typical deliverables included a formal report, a live PowerPoint present-

tation involving all team members, binders filled with pertinent written documents, and a flash drive containing all reports and data for storage and updating purposes.

The formal presentation was held during the last week of the semester. In addition to the community partner, invited guests included local community leaders, campus faculty, staff, administration, and the local news media. The instructor served merely as master of ceremonies, allowing the students to conduct the formal presentation and field questions from the audience. A multi-screen visual presentation allowed for easy viewing in a large classroom with theater seating. Each team presented their portion of the project in a logical order, allowing individual students sufficient time to explain personal contributions. The formal presentations were followed by a question and answer period. Many attendees stayed for informal discussions with students after the program was completed.

Community Partners

The outcomes of the four service-learning projects were impressive. The first class updated the emergency action plan for the regional chapter of the American Red Cross. The existing plan was comprised largely of paper documents. Contact lists and operating methods were outdated, important documents were missing, and topographical maps appeared to be copied from phonebooks. The students created a modern package summarized onto a flash drive that could be downloaded onto the chapter's main computer network and the laptops used in the field. Contact lists were updated into a format for easy modification, operating methods were standardized to national guidelines, missing information was found and categorized for easy retrieval, and topographical maps were downloaded from free satellite imagery. The extreme detail of the new map system with pinpoint elevations proved to be indispensable when the local watershed flooded a few months after the program was presented.

The service-learning project for the second class involved a young women's transition home which helped residents move from foster care to independent living. A business plan was created that aided in fundraising, community involvement, volunteer recruitment, and employment placement. The operating procedures of this organization were transformed from that of an inefficient volunteer program to a self-sufficient modern management system.

The third class worked with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. The recently-appointed HH officers felt they had an assortment of management problems, the largest of which was the need for a contractor/volunteer training manual. A detailed investigation by the students revealed significantly different problems and priorities. The major construction volunteers (contractors) indicated their greatest need was logistical help in scheduling volunteers. The students created a modern planning and communication system linking contractor needs with the correct number and type of volunteers. The most urgent training manual need was for new homeowners, so a formal program was created for past and present recipients of new homes. An added feature of this project was the inclusion of local professional society members who volunteered to help sustain the updates initiated by the students.

The fourth service-learning project was the creation of a Cystic Fibrosis information center and referral network within the campus library. The size of the community did not warrant a local Cystic Fibrosis Foundation chapter, so local residents affected by CF were previously required to travel long distances for certain types of assistance. The students used resources from various national, state, and local contacts to sponsor a well-attended public event intended to raise local awareness about the disease. The new information center included a support organization linking CF families and caregivers.

Students

The positive student experiences derived from the projects can be illustrated by a few appropriate examples. A student with strong computer skills and internet interests became the driving force behind the technology leap for the Red Cross disaster plan. A student from a family-owned financial services business became the leader in establishing a sound business plan for the women's transition home. A student who represented the third generation of a family-owned construction company quickly discovered that the initial needs proposed by the Habitat for Humanity contacts were not the most pressing actual problems encountered by the contractors. A student with years of progressive customer service authority became the hands-on event planner for the Cystic Fibrosis evening. All of these nontraditional students, who would have been academically categorized simply as management majors, were better utilized in unique portions of the projects due to the specific skills identified in their work experiences and by their designated personal choices.

The most visible benefits of a service learning project that links students with a non-profit organization are generally associated with the higher profile community partner. Identifying the benefits derived by the students may be more difficult, but the four projects of this study had numerous personal success stories. One example involved two students who received the school's annual Service-Learning Student Award for their efforts.

The Red Cross project created such interest within the organization that requests about expanding the program to other chapters around the state were received immediately. Two students volunteered to repeat the presentation to Red Cross representatives from other areas of the state who were not able to attend the original event. This second presentation took place at an off-campus location a month after the semester was over and the students had graduated. In addition to their service-learning award recognition, these students received personal references for graduate school admission and employment purposes. The main thrust of the references was their personal contributions to a very successful service-learning project.

The College of Business

The College of Business did not require experiential learning in the curriculum of any business course during the four years of this study. Business students could graduate without being exposed to an actual hands-on business experience. The inclusion of service-learning into the curriculum of a particular business course was entirely up to the discretion of the instructor. The positive response from students and community partners to the voluntary implementation of service-learning into the capstone course did not go unnoticed.

After the completion of the projects outlined in this study the College of Business revised its core course requirements, creating a new course called "Business Consulting and Practicum." This three (semester) hour course is now a requirement of all business management majors. Students spend the entire semester working in teams on a project with a community partner. The existence of this new course will increase the total number of business students involved in service-learning throughout the College of Business, but the composition of student majors within the classroom will not change. The proper placement of nontraditional students within the new class at the regional campuses will continue to be crucial.

Conclusion

The simultaneous growth trends of nontraditional students and service-learning pose unique considerations for regional campuses with smaller class sizes and restricted academic opportunities. The introduction of service-learning into a business course can be successful if care is taken to leverage the diverse skills of the nontraditional students with the specific needs of the community partner. Modern employment recruitment techniques routinely look beyond the applicant's academic history to include work experience and personal interest information in order to assist employers in choosing and placing employees more effectively. A nontraditional student's work experience and personal interests should be considered in the placement choices of a service-learning project for the same reasons.

Recommendations

Although this article deals with a specific group of students the two basic recommendations resulting from it need not be confined to regional campuses or the College of Business. Recent technology advancements in course delivery techniques suggest a third recommendation which corresponds to the theme present in the first two. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Recognize and utilize student diversity that extends beyond the obvious. Increase the utilization of the students in the classroom by learning more about their work experiences, life experiences, and personal interests. These hidden skills may also be helpful in determining the type of service-learning assignments that can be undertaken.
2. Empower the students by giving them more influence on personal assignments. Students may wish to work in areas quite different than the obvious opportunities offered by the immediate academic environment. The instructor is not the lone authority in regard to the best area of placement for each student.
3. Expand the academic diversity within the classroom through the use of distance learning technology. The ability to offer new courses at regional campuses that were previously considered

impractical for financial or instructor availability reasons will further increase student academic diversity and benefit the service-learning experience.

Opportunities

These findings provide an opportunity for future research. Given that a desired skill for business students is to coordinate the work of others and service-learning projects benefit from student diversity across college boundaries, the opportunity to combine the two concepts is apparent. Business students could be assigned the managerial tasks of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling the service-learning efforts of classes outside the College of Business. This interdisciplinary approach would allow the pursuit of larger or more diverse projects in areas such as the fine arts, education, engineering, etc. The techniques discussed in this study are applicable to a wide array of programs. One of the ways to increase diversity in service-learning is by thinking outside of the walls of the traditional classroom, outside the academic box.

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