

## **University/Community Partnerships: Engaging Business Students in Leadership and Solution-Based Approaches**

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*This paper will address the importance of engaging business students in new approaches to problem solving that will enhance their ability to create vibrant economies and collaborate with other professionals in an effort to sustain development in a global economy. These approaches include service-learning opportunities, teaching about micro-enterprises, and applying business principles to social entrepreneurship. A review of the literature regarding how service learning can benefit business students is included.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last few years, companies have implemented this phrase, Integrated Talent Management, to describe an integrated system approach to recruiting, employee development, performance management, compensation, and overall training and development of their workforce (Bricout, 2004). Besides creating a more efficient talent management system, organizations require the ability to rapidly address and effectively respond to business needs. Just as companies are in desperate need of a critical thinking workforce and abled leaders, business schools have come under more scrutiny for teaching practical and critical thinking skills to their students. Courses where students can apply theory to practice are becoming popular as universities respond to issues of sustainable community development and social responsibility. Service-learning opportunities within the classroom are now encouraged so that students can practice the skills they are learning and apply them to real situations in their local community.

### **LEADERSHIP TRAINING**

Leadership is a key topic in global business as well. (Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011) However, while the literature review provides much inquiry on leadership, little is known about responsible leadership. The new challenge in global management is to develop a new model of leadership training that provides the 'out of the box' experience, encouraging students to think critically about new solutions to existing problems. (Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011a). This has become a challenge for educators as well. While some schools are using virtual and online courses to teach students about practical business problems and solutions, others are offering their students real opportunities to test their newly acquired skills in areas of the world where leadership and business solutions are lacking. In study abroad programs students are

getting the chance to work with teams of other international professionals to create businesses, work in agriculture, develop plans for housing, and sustainable food and water for impoverished communities. Many universities now have campuses on other continents and encourage their students to spend time in another country before graduating. This experience allows the student to usually learn another language, participation in the culture, work with other international students and professionals in their discipline, and expand their perspective regarding issues effecting that country and how their combined knowledge may assist the growth of new solutions.

The scholarship of engaging students in the learning process has become more important in institutions of higher learning. Due to changes in awareness, teaching of ethical issues and values, and a sense of social responsibility, universities have an increasing interest and often a social mandate to develop courses on student leadership, sustainable community development and social enterprise. It is not unusual to see a multidisciplinary approach to teaching this plethora of skills. Harvard University now offers a summer institute every few years to bring Human Services and Business professionals together to collaborate on social problems and combine their expertise. Teaching Human Services professionals about marketing, budgeting, working with a nonprofit agency, or conducting a program evaluation, the Harvard Institute brings new business skills to the social service profession. At the same time they develop the business professionals' skills in interpersonal helping, group dynamics, an understanding of social policy, and current social problems. Combined groups of Human Services and Business professionals tackle real life problems using a combination of skills that each discipline possesses. Role plays are sometimes used but a common thread in the development of these leadership skills for both human services and business students is the service-learning opportunity. This enables the student or professional to visit an agency and put into practice the knowledge, values, and skills they have learned to assist the program in some way.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Engaging Students in Service Learning**

The literature review reveals that service learning programs foster student engagement within the community and promote leadership, social, and civic responsibility. Several studies have presented their findings regarding the engagement of students in these activities. Experiential education and service learning activities is an area which can easily complement the traditional business classes, by enhancing business students' learning outcomes (Manring, 2004). Specifically, these engagement activities would include service learning projects embedded within courses while providing community service opportunities and leadership training for the class. These activities would enhance the learning and allow students to apply what they have learned in the classroom to a real life situation. An evaluation of the activity would occur in the classroom at another time, giving students the opportunity to learn a concept, practice it, and then evaluate the outcome. This type of learning is seen as beneficial at all levels of higher education.

The development of university and community partnerships has been studied indicating that service learning and internships allow students the opportunity to link theory to practice at both the micro and macro level. Students receive invaluable community practice opportunities and when universities and communities work together, they have the necessary resources to enable residents to strengthen the capacity for control over their lives. In two separate university projects in the state of Georgia, students from various disciplines were actively engaged in sharing the knowledge they learned in the classroom with residents of their community. (Brown and Kinsella, 2006)

Brown and Kinsella talk about two separate Service Learning Projects which were developed in Georgia with a focus on university and community partnerships. In one project, a neighborhood family support center was established in a disadvantaged neighborhood near the University of Georgia in Athens. Approximately 163 residents who were African American, Latino, or Anglo shared a resource center that provided English classes, day care, parenting classes, legal assistance, case management, needs assessments, counseling, as well as social activities for the children and adults in an attempt to develop a

cohesive neighborhood. The goal was for people to benefit from locating resources, and to meet and sustain good relationships with their neighbors in an effort to become empowered to maintain a healthy and vibrant neighborhood by working together with other residents. Students from a variety of disciplines were recruited to use their expertise in working with the residents, assist with the creation of the center, complete the landscaping, develop a playground for the children who attended the after school program, teach the children in the day care center, translate both the English and Spanish languages for the immigrant families who lived nearby, help with issues like family budgeting, tax preparation, or banking, and finally to assist with the legal aspect of citizenship for many of the families. The Center was an ongoing project coordinated by the School of Social Work with other university faculty, students, and community resources collaborating for a number of years to benefit both the residents of the community as well as the students who completed volunteer and service learning activities at the center. A number of project grants enabled the continued development of the program for 8 years, after which the Center was incorporated as a local Boys and Girls Club. Successful outcomes for the residents included a more engaged and safer community with parental involvement in school and educational activities for their children. English as a second language was useful for immigrants who needed the skills to obtain jobs and acquire citizenship. Local gangs were deterred from entering the neighborhood since parent, community and university cohesion was strong. The occurrence of crime decreased and the availability of local resources was beneficial to the residents who were not aware of all the community services. Outcomes for the university students included learning about a variety of community development models, learning about and using advocacy models, assisting in the development of cultural diversity curricula and then teaching residents the program, facilitating groups, and using business accounting techniques with the residents like tax preparation, budgeting, and maintaining a check book. Student assessment methods included observation of students by a faculty member, writing assignments that focus on theories used in practice, evaluating peers in their teams, conducting research projects, reviewing service learning journals, and obtaining resident feedback about student contact.

A second project at another public institution, Georgia Southern University, also involved a partnership with the university and several rural counties surrounding the school. As a result of an increasing Latino population in southeast Georgia due to agricultural needs, services were seen as vital for this population. A Latino Outreach Center was developed with the goal of the partnership to increase practice on the individual, family, and community level with the Latino population. Academic and social supports for the children were seen as essential since many of the children did not speak English and could not participate in school assignments. English as a second language was seen as imperative for the families and seminars on work permits and immigration law was also necessary. Community support was needed as well since businesses and local residents were not knowledgeable about Hispanic culture, language or customs. The Center for Latino Outreach and Research Services was developed and included faculty from such disciplines as political science, sociology, social services, business, education, nursing, and dental hygiene. Many grants were received to continue providing basic services like English classes, tutoring for the children, an after-school program and summer camp, immigration and legal services, referrals to local resources for food, clothing, or housing, banking information, and other socialization programs for the families. The community was provided with interpretation services and information on the Hispanic culture. Businesses were informed as to immigration law and worker permits so they were in compliance with federal and state policies. Student learning outcomes included increased knowledge of cultural diversity, community problem solving, better skills in observing, interviewing, and researching, and increased empathy and knowledge regarding social issues. Assessment techniques included reflective journaling, writing assignments, and observations by faculty members.

In other service-learning projects, students used their skills to think and work globally. A program called Project Ulysses was launched by PricewaterhouseCoopers to explicitly link leadership development to global community development and channel the resulting learning back to the organization to assist in strategic management. Using an integrated service-learning program, small teams were sent to developing countries to apply their business expertise to complex social and economic challenges. The cross-cultural PricewaterhouseCoopers teams worked on a pro-bono basis in field

assignments for eight weeks with Non Government Organizations, community-based organizations and intergovernmental agencies where communities were facing the effects of poverty, political conflict and environmental devastation. Some of the learning outcomes indicated that cultural differences should be an enabler, not an inhibitor; team collaboration will bring success; and leadership is about building sustained relationships.(Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011a) After interviewing 70 of the participants about their experiences of living and working abroad, a learning narrative was produced which highlighted five key areas. This evaluation of the service-learning project revealed that learning occurred in ethical literacy, cultural intelligence, global mind-set, self-development, and community building. A post-program survey was sent to the participants and later confirmed that the project had the long term effect of developing and enhancing these five competencies which are seen as necessary for global leadership. International service-learning is recommended in this study as a valuable tool in developing global leaders.

There have been many successful collaborations between business students and service-learning projects which involved non-profit, human services agencies. In one project, business communication students used their skills to incorporate Facebook and Twitter into the non-profit's communication profile. They improved the public image and visibility of the agency, allowing people to donate to the non-profit's fundraising campaigns as well as promote their annual activities. The students marketed a new Facebook slogan for the organization and encouraged people to donate to several of their events bringing a visibility to the nonprofit that had not existed beforehand. Outcomes for the students included learning how to think critically, write more concisely, and to use social media in a constructive and socially responsible way. They also learned about the agency's mission statement, history, and purpose of their service. (Crews and Stitt-Gohdes, Wanda, L. 2012)

In some projects human services professionals have worked with business students as they interned with non-profit agencies and learned about Board of Trustee governance, developed leadership skills, and an understanding of the value of community service. (Purdy and Lawless, 2012) This study discusses how a course in Board Governance combines an internship with a non-profit organization to create a service-learning activity. Students learn about community needs, social responsibility, and how working with other disciplines can produce unique results. The community also benefits because students now recognize the value of service and leadership.

## **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIPS AND MICRO-ENTERPRISES**

Micro-enterprises have also become increasingly important in social development and have helped to alleviate some poverty in developing countries. This concept can be utilized in business classes to teach both financial and non-financial issues to students as they embark on a humanitarian service-learning activity. The value of stimulating entrepreneurs and the impact this has on student learning has been discussed in several papers. (Mungaray et. al., 2007) Students can participate as a class in making a loan to a small enterprise in a developing country. For as little as \$25 a class can make an investment in a micro-enterprise and learn about models of finance. As the class continues, the students can get updates on how their company is doing. Within time, they may even see their money repaid and the fruits of their labor realized in the continuation of an enterprise in a developing country. Many micro-enterprises in developing countries can be accessed online for further research.

Along these same lines, service-learning can be used to teach sustainable development. (Brower, 2011) Students may spend time actually studying abroad or in a local indigenous community where they experience poverty, malnutrition, education that lacks resources, and other social problems. In her study, Holly Brower, took 2 faculty members and 8 students to such a community in an undeveloped country and spent one month studying the issues and then worked with her class to develop a plan of sustainable change. She then developed a framework for a business elective that includes service learning as a component of change. As an alternative, they may study about the experience of living abroad virtually, but then learn to apply the same techniques to bring sustainable change to a local indigenous community without ever leaving their own country.

Building upon recent developments in entrepreneurship education, business students can be taught how to use the same skills they have learned in private entrepreneurship to develop social entrepreneurship. This will involve learning about three competing and distinct logics. These include learning about social welfare, the public sector, as well as commercial strategies. In an article by Pache and Chowdhury (2012) they discuss how students need to create new and innovative hybrid strategies in the development of social entrepreneurship. Since business students need to address the services that are necessary for all people, the social entrepreneurship is another avenue for building a business within a community that may be lacking in such services as affordable housing, job skills training, or health care. In the article they address the strategy of adapting pedagogical tools to the goal of teaching students how to combine the three logics successfully.

## CONCLUSION

Creating vibrant global economies is a challenge that affects everyone. Using a multidisciplinary approach and then applying techniques like service learning, and teaching about social entrepreneurship and micro-enterprises, we will enhance the traditional method of teaching to engage business students in leadership and solution based approaches that will be necessary if we are to sustain development as we move forward in the twenty-first century. It is recommended that universities and communities work together to become partners for the mutual benefit of student learning as well as local and global community development.

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