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An Undergraduate Management Course Project: Experiential Service Learning

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An Undergraduate Management Course Project: Experiential Service Learning

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ABSTRACT: *The process of engaging undergraduate students can be increasingly challenging. Creating an environment of engagement can be particularly daunting among Principles of Management students due to the theoretical nature of the materials and the perceived overlap with previous management and business coursework. In order to promote internalization and application of management and organizational behavior concepts, a service learning course project is assigned. The following service project not only offers opportunities for experiential learning, but also creates ties with community stakeholders. The learning objectives of the project, as well as the details of the instructions for implementation are presented. Teaching Notes are also provided.*

Keywords: introduction to management, experiential learning, service learning

INTRODUCTION

The service learning experiential project described here is part of a business course, Principles of Management. The class covers topics primarily related to the four functions of management: planning, leading, organizing, and controlling. A primary focus of the course is to engage students in understanding the practical applications of course concepts. This experiential service learning project is designed to allow students a means of practical application of the four principles while also promoting positive experiences in relation to social responsibility and the increasingly important topic of social enterprise (Dart, 2004).

Over the last several decades, an increasingly large number of organizations have adopted some element of social impact or service into their mission and vision. While most organizations are aware of the impact of the four traditional functions of management via everyday operations, many do not connect these principles to social impact or service. By exposing future organizational leaders to projects that bridge this gap, educators may have an early impact on dynamic thinking that connects traditional functions of management to service-relevant missions.

The positive and long lasting impact of service learning on student participants is well researched and documented (Avalos et al 1999). Benefits include both behavioral and value-based elements. Students involved in service during college are more likely to attend graduate school, earn higher level degrees, volunteer after college, participate in community action, and be better equipped for diverse work settings (Avalos et al., 1999). Additionally, there is evidence that students who are given service-learning opportunities may show better academic performance as a result (Strange, 2004)

This project has been offered over 11 semesters in sections of Principles of Management courses. Feedback from students, as well as from participating organizations, has been used in efforts of continual improvement of the relevant projects. The service project is suitable for Principles of Management courses as well as related courses such as Organizational Behavior, Special Topics in Management, and Non-Profit Management. A more involved version of this project may be adapted to graduate level courses, particularly applied courses in MBA programs.

The experiential service learning project objectives, specifications, and description of deliverables are included below. Teaching Notes are available upon request.

PROJECT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The project is designed for group sizes of up to four members. The objectives the experiential service learning project follow:

- 1) To give each student an opportunity to apply each of the four management functions of planning, leading, organizing, and controlling in practical scenarios.
- 2) To explore creative ways to incorporate management principles into service activities.
- 3) To increase understanding of the positive impacts of organizational service on the community.
- 4) To allow students an opportunity to create network connections with leadership at non-profits and charities.
- 5) To promote greater understanding of management principles by allowing student groups present their projects along with examples of how they made practical applications of the four functions of management to their peers.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Students form small groups to use the four functions of management to engage in service learning for the benefit of a non-profit organization. Students are given several opportunities for meeting other class members during obligatory group-discussion breakout sessions. After students have met other members of the class, they are given an in-class opportunity to interview each other about skills, work styles, and schedules. Then, after learning in class about the tenets of successful teams (synergies, specialization of talent, complimentary skill sets, similar work ethics, etc.), students self-select into teams. Once in teams, students are required to engage in group brainstorming to create a list of possible project ideas that they can implement for the benefit of their chosen partner organization. Each group creates an expanded summary of their top five ideas, from which they are to choose the best idea for their project. In the case of an insurmountable obstacle to the completion of the top project idea, the group may choose one of the remaining four ideas.

Service learning is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes.” (Jacoby 1996)

The definition of service learning must be fully executed by each group. That is, each group must not only engage in a service project that directly relates to the relevant course concepts, but also reflect on that experience in the form of a presentation that must be prepared and shared with peers. Through this process, the full definition of service learning is integrated into each group’s project.

PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS

1) Students will form small teams of no more than 4 persons, then meet to come up with a fundraising idea to raise money for a charity of your group’s choice. You should use the four aspects of management (planning, leading, controlling, organizing) to help you to your goal. Teams should also consider how your project relates to the 4 components of an organization (task, people, technology, and structure). In other words, decide what the project task is, how each member of the team contributes (people), and in what ways might you use technology or structure to reach your goals. At the end of the semester, each group will need to make a short presentation (10-15 minutes) in which they explain what their group did in relation to these components.

- 2) Each group should select a nonprofit organization with which to partner. Organizations may be any size and may cover any size or scope, varying from local to international. The brainstorming process should help generate ideas for fundraising activities. Remember, the more ideas the better - there are no bad ideas in a brainstorming session. Once the group generates the ideas, narrow it down to the best 5 possibilities. From these the group will choose one to use as the basis of the action plan. NOTE: groups may find that while generating the action plan, the group realizes another idea would be better; refer back on the top 5 list at this point.
- 3) Contact the organization to obtain permission for collaboration. Team members may also consider partnering with the organization to determine optimal fundraising programming. The activity must, however, be a unique contribution. NOTE: groups may not simply participate in an existing fundraiser that the organization is already organizing. Exceptions can only be made if the group develops and implements a new activity or program that was not originally planned.
- 4) The action plan should follow the four aspects described in the text, including specific steps (how), people (who), resources (what), and time period (when). Ideas should be detailed enough that you could give your list to a non-group member and they would be able to implement your project.
- 5) *Plan, lead, organize, and control* the activity as a group. In essence, each group shall function as a self-managed team as it completes the project. At this point you should know if your first choice of activity/organization is going to work. If not, go back to your brainstorming ideas and pick another. Remember, you have to present on what happened. You are responsible for all actions you and your group decide on. Make sure that if, for example, your group decides to put on a fundraising event on campus, someone in your group needs to be sure to check with the appropriate campus office to reserve that space as well as attain permission to use that space. In other words, just as you would have to do if you were organizing a project for your organization, you are responsible for all aspects of planning and organizing, including obtaining necessary permissions, etc.
- 6) Review, reflect, and document your progress as a team. You should begin preparing your presentation as you complete your project. As a team, you should keep notes of your activities. Include those notes as the foundation of the topics you will include in your presentation.

PROJECT DELIVERABLES

Each team must:

- 1) Prepare a brainstorming summary which outlines at least twenty ideas for projects that could be implemented to raise funds or in some way benefit the selected organization.
- 2) Prepare an action plan that outlines which tasks are to be completed by team members.
- 3) Prepare a 10-15 minute PowerPoint or Prezi presentation that explains the fundraising event or activity that the group chose to complete. The Presentation must also incorporate concepts from the text that relate to the group's process and activity experience. Topics should include at least the four functions of management: planning, leading, organizing, and controlling.

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TEACHING NOTES

General Teaching Notes

As noted in the manuscript, the service learning project is designed as an integrated practical application of class topics and material. Students are educated on the four major functions of management during class through several mediums, including in-class discussions, guest speakers, and lectures. The project is due near the end of the semester so that students have a level of familiarity with and understanding of the planning, leading, organizing, and controlling functions of management before completing the presentation portion of the project.

Teaching notes for project specifications:

1) You will form small groups of no more than 4 persons, then meet to come up with a fundraising idea to raise money for a charity of your group's choice. You should use the four aspects of management (planning, leading, controlling, organizing) to help you to your goal. You should also consider how your project relates to the 4 components of an organization (task, people, technology, and structure). In other words, decide what your project task is, how each member of the team contributes (people), and in what ways might you use technology or structure to reach your goals. At the end of the semester, your group will need to make a short presentation (10-15 minutes) in which you explain what your group did in relation to these components.

Teaching Note: Prior to allowing students to self-select into teams, the instructor may implement several short team-building and ice-breaker activities which promote new introductions between class members.

2) Each group should select a nonprofit organization with which to partner. Organizations may be any size and may cover any size or scope, varying from local to international. The brainstorming process should help you generate ideas for fundraising activities. Remember, the more ideas the better - there are no bad ideas in a brainstorming session. Once you generate the ideas, narrow it down to the best 5 possibilities. From these you can choose one to use as the basis of your action plan. NOTE: you may find that while generating your action plan, you realize you may want to use another idea - you can refer back on the top 5 list at this point.

Teaching Note: Students typically select their own target organization. If students have trouble finding an organization, the professor may elect to provide contact information for non-profit organizations that have expressed interest in working with the university and students. If multiple groups want to work with the same non-profit, that is allowed pending approval from the organization.

3) Contact the organization to obtain permission for collaboration. Team members may also consider partnering with the organization to determine optimal fundraising programming. The activity must, however, be a unique contribution. NOTE: groups may not simply participate in an existing fundraiser that the organization is already organizing. Exceptions can only be made if the group develops and implements a new activity or program that was not originally planned.

Teaching Note: *Students must create added value for the organization as part of this project. Simply participating in an existing event is not sufficient. Student focus should be on managing a new and creative activity or event that complements their partner organization's needs and values.*

4) The action plan should follow the four aspects described in the text, including specific steps (how), people (who), resources (what), and time period (when). Ideas should be detailed enough that you could give your list to a non-group member and they would be able to implement your project.

Teaching Note: *The instructor may elect to remind students to document all details of the planning process, even those that they consider routine or unimportant. As the semester progresses and new topics are covered in class, students may realize new or additional relevance of past activities in the context of the more recent lecture material.*

5) *Plan, lead, organize, and control* the activity as a group. In essence, each group shall function as a self-managed team as it completes the project. At this point you should know if your first choice of activity/organization is going to work. If not, go back to your brainstorming ideas and pick another. Remember, you have to present on what happened. You are responsible for all actions you and your group decide on. Make sure that if, for example, your group decides to put on a fundraising event on campus, someone in your group needs to be sure to check with the appropriate campus office to reserve that space as well as attain permission to use that space. In other words, just as you would have to do if you were organizing a project for your organization, you are responsible for all aspects of planning and organizing, including obtaining necessary permissions, etc.

Teaching Note: *At this point in the project, it is helpful to emphasize to students the importance of relating the service project to the four functions of managing. Students should be reminded that a major component of experiential learning is the process itself.*

6) Review, reflect, and document your progress as a team. You should begin preparing your presentation as you complete your project. As a team, you should keep notes of your activities. Include those notes as the foundation of the topics you will include in your presentation.

Teaching Notes: *Students are expected to all participate in the presentation. The instructor may consider emphasizing to students the importance of experience in presenting for successful job interviews and job performance. The instructor may also elect to use certain amounts of class time and time outside of class to meet individually with groups to review their presentations and provide feedback.*