The Role of Higher Education in Preparing the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs: The Role of Service Learning

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What role does higher education have in preparing the next generation of entrepreneurs? How can curricula be adapted and organized to allow students to go beyond learning theory and formula to applying what they learn to real world situations? Is it possible to link learning to opportunities within the community to build stronger more enduring businesses that can compete locally, nationally or internationally? This paper will discuss a model of service learning that strategically embeds activities within the community in specific organizations/businesses. Students participate in real world problems and challenges thematically linked to the learning outcomes of their course. Business gain extra “hands” assisting them in creatively facing the challenges of operating in such turbulent and competitive times. Opportunities for building collaborative relationships within the community and beyond will be discussed.

Introduction and Background

National-Louis University (NLU) was founded in 1886 by Elizabeth Harrison, a pioneer in elementary and early childhood education. Originally the school served immigrant families, focusing on mothers and children. The underlying teaching philosophy was and continues to be grounded in progressive and constructivist educational principles. NLU is committed to the belief that linking theory and practice is the role of higher education in all disciplines. A commitment to the community in which it resides plays a critical role in informing the educational learning outcomes of programs and coursework. NLU is seen as an innovator in educational content and methods.

The mission of National-Louis University is to develop highly competent and humane individuals to serve and lead in an increasingly diverse and global society. Central to this mission is a commitment to life-long and active engagement in learning. As an independent, not-for-profit university that values teaching, NLU links tested theory and practice with the on-going experiences of its students. NLU is sensitive to the changing needs of society and is responsive to the students and publics it serves.
Students at NLU include not only adults who are working full time or contemplating career changes, but also teachers and administrators who want to further their education while continuing to work in their fields, and immigrants and other language minorities with limited English skills. In 1989, the College of Management and Business was founded to address the emerging needs of adults returning to school.

Currently the University has three colleges: the National College of Education, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Management and Business. Thirteen degrees are offered from undergraduate to doctoral level and certificate programs across the three colleges. The institution serves nearly 15,000 students annually from its five Chicago-area campuses and at academic centers in Northern Virginia/Washington, D.C.; Milwaukee/Beloit, Wisconsin; Tampa, Florida and Nowy Sacz, Poland (College of Management and Business, 2008).

The College of Management and Business: Commitment to Community

The College of Management and Business (CMB), established in 1989, is also steeped in progressive and constructivist teaching philosophy and methodologies. This innovative business school embraces the idea of integrative and holistic thinking as it creates learning opportunities for students. The College combines the typical academic classroom experience with the realities of the business world. Concepts and theories are immediately used on the job or in the community by students. The goal of a CMB education is to “engage talented individual and business organization in a powerful and rewarding learning and discovery process. ...We develop leaders that excel in the ever-changing marketplace by thinking strategically about solving issues and challenges, while harnessing opportunities” (C. Multhauf, Executive Dean CMB from NLU web pages).

As the College works with community partners, providing educational degree programs at locations within the community (not on the University campus), it explores ways to support specific partnership goals and objectives. These goals might address the organization’s commitment to community redevelopment, to small business start up and support, to helping existing businesses compete in today’s rapidly changing environment, to helping business’ use technology more effectively and efficiently, or even to creating the next generation of entrepreneurs within the community.

Using the curriculum of specific courses to building in service projects, linking theory with real world practice, is a way of addressing the needs of the community and meeting the goals of our community partners. Designing cumulative activities that can begin in one course and continue through others, even followed up on by students in subsequent years is one way of supporting the community and giving our students real hands on experience, perhaps even stimulating an entrepreneurial spirit.

What is Service Learning?

Service learning began in the US at the University of Cincinnati as the Cooperative Education Movement in 1903. Throughout its more than 100 year history service learning has been reshaped and expanded to meet the growing needs of local communities as well as country initiatives. In 1944 the GI Bill linked education and service for soldiers returning from WWII. In the 1960’s the RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) linked the experience of retired leaders with community and organizational needs. In 1961 President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps. Although it wasn’t until 1966 that the term “service learning” was used, the philosophy and objectives were always the same. In 1976 the Governor of California, Jerry Brown, created a non federal youth corps at the state level, called the California Conservation Corps. From the 1990’s until today an emphasis on volunteerism, community and environmental restoration, civic engagement, with a focus on linking direct service and learning has emerged (History of Service Learning in the US, 2009).
Service learning experiences are focused on cooperative experiences that promote teamwork, community involvement and good citizenship. These real life experiences build cooperation, not competition, between and among participants as they address complex problems in those real life settings. Service learning opportunities focus on problem solving that is very pointed and directed to the needs of those experiencing the problem (Eyler, 1999). Participants in service learning project go beyond generalized and abstract knowledge that comes from text books. Critical thinking, the ability to recognize the most important questions and issues, is promoted as students get immediate feedback from the community in which they serve (Standards and Indicators for Effective Service Learning Practice, 2009). This immediate feedback may not only challenge previously held beliefs and values but ultimately supports social, emotional, and cognitive learning and development.

An important element of the learning outcomes here is the impact on the community. This dynamic process of student engagement within a community, solving real world problems that are linked to the content of a particular course, allows the community to benefit. And as students learn the skills necessary to address real world problems, recognizing the fluid elements in the external environment, the classroom learning takes on a much richer meaning. Stimulating thinking, creative problem solving, collaboration, and strategizing beyond the next examination, are important by-products of service learning for students and the organizations or businesses they serve. Within service learning there is an emphasis on reciprocal learning, so it is important for students to learn but equally important for the community partner to come away with additional knowledge. For the community organization or business, links to the university where best practices are discussed and reviewed, a fresh eye examining difficulty questions or problems, extra hands and heads taking on the specific issues plaguing an organization, and a commitment from partners to put additional action and energy can mean the difference between success and failure.

Possible Models

The Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) degree is a well recognized graduate degree within the business world. The goal of the MBA at CMB is to assist students to develop critical analytical and problem solving skills. It enhances management and leadership abilities while helping students apply quantitative and qualitative evaluation techniques to business situations. The MBA also strengthens practitioner skills in finance, accounting and economics, and explores the impact of ethical and legal issues on the work place.

The MBA offered by CMB is organized into four terms. Term One includes an Introduction to Graduate Studies, helping students recognize the workload necessary for this degree, and assists them in identifying both University resources as well as external resources necessary for successful completion of the degree program. Other courses in Term One include Organizational Behavior, Macroeconomics, and Strategic Marketing. Term Two includes Managerial Accounting, Project Management, and Managerial Economics. Term Three requires Financial Management, Multinational Management, and Technology and Management. The final term, Four, includes Ethical and Legal Aspects of Business, Financial Markets, and Strategic Management. Within Term Four there is also an introduction to the Capstone simulation. This simulation, offered during Strategic Management, gives students and opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned throughout their degree program and to use their newly acquired knowledge in strategic decision making within a fictitious company.
Integrating a community service learning project within this curriculum does pose challenges but also tremendous opportunities for both students and the community businesses and organizations. Linking the community based request and activities to the course learning outcomes is an important first step. Making sure students have an understanding of not only the theoretical underpinnings of the content, but also an awareness of the current literature and best practices is a must. The responsibility of the professor teaching the course then becomes not only to share the content of the discipline but also to act as a resource and facilitator who supports all of the elements of the application of that knowledge as students try to address the needs of the community partner.

One model is to begin with the first course, Organizational Behavior, and have students link the learning outcomes of the course to a service learning organization. Analyzing the culture, the readiness for change, and the organizations ability to learn may be a good way to begin any project. Small teams of students could study the organization prior to any on site assessment, viewing company public documents, talking with knowledgeable persons, viewing the product or service within the community etc.

During the second course, Macroeconomics, students might engage in a very directed analysis of the economic conditions in the neighborhood, a demographic analysis addressing the size and buying power of this the community and the consumer base. The professor might also suggest looking at competitors in the neighborhood and what their capacity is to serve the market. The economics professor would use the partnership as a living case study to serve student learning but also to serve the community business. What does this information tell us? What do we know? What do we still need to know? How does this link to the organization we studied in the first course? What might be some of the next steps? It is possible that from this analysis of the economic conditions and the previous analysis of the organization a particular challenge or issue may arise. Using this model, as students moved through their course of study they would use the same organization to apply their new knowledge to particular concerns within the organization. This could be continued through the degree program addressing multiple aspects of the business or organization as the student progressed through the course of study.

Another way of using the service learning opportunity for students is within a particular course. This model allows students to work on one project during one course. It could be that during a marketing course, a new marketing plan could be developed for a community business. Within the multinational management course students could do an analysis to identify an international expansion project, or even something as direct as helping a company find an international partner or new global source.

Either of these models is an excellent way to give students hands on experience, applying their knowledge to real challenges. This not only serves the student and enhances learning outcomes but as stated earlier supports the enterprise within the community. But it may also encourage students to take on greater challenges and opportunities as they get more experience within the real world of business. As students face challenges, successfully or have to rethink and try again, their confidence in their ability to problem solve and apply critical thinking to real world issues build their entrepreneurial as well as intrapreneurial skill set.

**Challenges**

While the models described above clearly are US based and steeped in an educational model with a student population that may be different from the traditional university, they can easily be adapted to meet the needs of a variety of cultures, university student populations, and stages of economic and community development. Historically service learning has been initiated to address economic difficulties within a local community or even country. The need for community economic development, creation of resources to support the local business community, and opportunity to participate in a living laboratory for students is particularly important in
Higher education, even with the advent of the Bologna Process, is historically difficult to motivate to change (About the Bologna Process, 2007). Traditions that extol thinking like “this is the way things are done here,” and keeping the classroom and the community separate no longer serve the best interest of students. Working with professors in key courses that most lend themselves to community projects may be a good way to pilot service learning. But rethinking curriculum, more closely linking it to other EU county higher education systems, and assuring mobility of students and faculty is an important part of the Bologna Process (Qualifications, Cycles/Three Process Systems, 2007). Recognizing the additional time and effort professors will need to commit to such a project must be addressed by university administration. While monetary incentives may be the most obvious and appreciated compensation, universities should be creative in addressing this concern. Building service learning into the evaluation, tenure and promotion process is important. Providing additional time, reduced teaching load, or even additional resources to support the work could also act as incentives to faculty.

Getting into the community may also not be easy. While businesses and organizations may clearly need some help rethinking their current strategies to meet the rapidly changing competitive environment, allowing the outside in can be very threatening. Clearly outlining the scope and focus of a project can alleviate some of the business concerns, recognizing the time and resource commitment on both sides and creating mutually acceptable timeline can support relationships. Overall identifying “what’s in it for me?” for the business is most important and ultimately can act as an incentive to allow service learning into the company.

Conclusions
Service learning is an opportunity for students to apply their learning and knowledge to real life issues within the community. Community businesses and organizations benefit through the work of students, under the guidance of their professor, applying best practices to those real life issues that impact day to day and strategic operations. While there are challenges for all involved, the benefits of this community outreach far outweigh them. In addition to the obvious benefit to local businesses and involved student, the idea that through this sort of effort, higher education may be creating opportunities for students to learn the skills necessary to become entrepreneurs, is most exciting.

References


Additional Reference Material


Johnston, M., et al. (2001). Sustainability Toolkit: 10 Steps To Maintaining Your Community Improvements. This toolkit takes you through a 10-step process for determining which efforts should be maintained and deciding how to successfully continue them. Available at: The Center for Civic Partnerships, www.civicpartnerships.org