

## USING NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING MARKETING INTERNSHIPS

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### ABSTRACT

Marketing programs commonly use non-profit organizations as work sites for student internships. These experiences permit the development of both technical and behavioral skills in a manner similar to assignments at their for-profit counterparts. However, a recent resurgence of volunteerism and widespread acceptance of service-learning affords marketing educators an opportunity to expand the role these internships play in the student's educational process. Careful planning and the use of appropriate reflective activities can provide exposure to cultural diversity and uncertainty, along with other benefits not normally associated with traditional internships.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education has been challenged to prepare students for a life as responsible citizens rather than solely concentrating on career development. In fact, this task has been identified by some as being the most important one facing educators as they move into the next century (Boyer 1994, Rifkin 1997). Business schools face a similar challenge, partially in response to the financial scandals of the 1980s. One report, sponsored by AACSB, registered a concern that while business school graduates may have the required analytical skills, they are insensitive to factors other than the bottom line. (Porter and McKibbin 1988). An underlying theme to these and other concerns is that higher education needs to do something about the growing reality gap between the needs of society and higher education's internal priorities. The need to prepare the next generation for a life that includes some devotion to community and community service is being amplified by a fundamental transformation of government. Entitlement programs and the welfare state are shrinking. Government subsidies of all types are being eliminated or reduced. The result is that the "civil" sector is replacing the government sector in providing for a significant portion of a community's needs. Therefore, a major educational challenge, today and in the future, is to teach students the

value of service and the importance of providing support for their communities.

### THE SERVICE-LEARNING SOLUTION

The good news is that many segments of our educational institutions and an increasing number of citizens are responding to the call for increased community involvement. This is especially true for young people and college students throughout the country with the emergence of community service classes (Hanna 1995). In addition, there has been a rebirth of volunteerism at both the college and professional level. According to a recent survey, nearly three fourths of the nation's 1.5 million college freshman performed some sort of public service within the past year (U.S. News 1997).

The bad news is that student volunteering tends to run in cycles and unless something changes to perpetuate this activity, it will again disappear, only to return in another 30 years (Zlotkowski 1996a). In order to avoid this historical decline, efforts must be made to connect needed community service with required university learning. Service-learning may be the long term solution. This educational method allows students to learn and develop through active participation in organized service that meets the needs of the community. At the same time, it is integrated into the academic curriculum providing students with a structured opportunity for critical reflection on their service experience.

While service-learning appears to provide a solution to closing the reality-academic priority gap, it requires a level of institutionalization that has yet to take place. Many schools have embraced service-learning but it has developed outside of individual departments and professional schools. The result has been a proliferation of Community Service 101 type courses and volunteer projects requiring students to perform a minimum number of hours of service while engaging in reflective type learning (e.g. journals). Less developed is the use of service-learning in courses directly related to the student's major.

## **SERVICE-LEARNING MARKETING INTERNSHIPS**

There are a variety of ways to incorporate community service into a student's university experience including business fraternities, youth groups, churches, and service clubs. However, these extracurricular involvements only provide the "service" part of service-learning. What they fail to provide is a connection with the student's academic studies. This linkage is required to bridge the academic-reality or academic-service gap. Only when this occurs does the activity provide the desired educational impact.

Another extracurricular activity that has similar characteristics is work experience. While any work experience may benefit an individual, experience unrelated to their academic major or course work tends to be of limited educational value. However, an academically related and structured experience in the form of an internship provides multiple benefits that are well known. Thus, we have two experiences, service and work, whose educational benefits are maximized only when they are tied to the academic curriculum.

Integration of service-learning into the marketing curriculum can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Among the possibilities are the fourth-credit option, a complete course built around service-learning, service activities and projects as a limited or extensive course requirement, or service-learning internships (Enos and Troppe 1996). All of these alternatives have their benefits, but only one provides the dual experience discussed above. Service-learning internships present marketing students with an opportunity to apply technical skills (e.g. develop a promotional strategy) and, at the same time, be exposed to the value of community service. By including reflective activities, service-learning internships provide a mix of theory and practice, observation and interaction, and thought and action, which allows students to learn from themselves (Cooper 1997).

Traditional internships and service-learning are often viewed as being somewhat incompatible because the focus of the two is different. Traditional internships concentrate on providing students with a progressive learning experience. At the other extreme, volunteerism focuses on the service being provided, not student learning. In order for the experience to qualify for service-learning the learning and service goals must carry equal weight and reinforce each other (Furco 1996, Sigmon 1994). While a true balance

may be difficult to achieve, careful development of an internship at a non-profit organization can provide the dual benefits necessary to qualify it as a service-learning experience.

The use of non-profit organizations as marketing internship work stations is nothing new. It is common to have a separate marketing function concerned with development (finding sources of funds) and the promotion of the organizations and its services. Academic assignments associated with non-profit internships often concentrate on developing technical skills and practical applications of theory. Deliverables may include actual marketing plans developed, results of surveys conducted, or examples of promotional pieces created. In some cases, students may be required to keep reflective journals but their emphasis is activities they performed and skills they learned, not how they felt about what they observed or experienced. However, by incorporating these elements into site selection, learning objectives and assignments, work station supervision, and reflective activities, the non-profit internship can qualify as a service-learning experience.

### **SETTING UP THE INTERNSHIP**

#### **Agency selection**

The first, and perhaps most critical step in using non-profit organizations as work stations for service-learning marketing internships is agency selection. There is no shortage of agencies that can benefit from the work of a marketing intern or, who in turn, can provide opportunities to achieve both internship and service-learning goals. Almost all of them can provide the necessary experience to meet the goals of a traditional internship.

One category of non-profits tends to be well organized, structured, managed, and somewhat up-to-date technologically. This group is lead by associations, health care providers, public media, and cultural organizations. Normally, they have a separate marketing department concerned with development and the marketing of the organizations and its events. Student's interning at one of these organizations should enhance their marketing skills and perhaps an appreciation for the importance of volunteering. A second category of non-profits tends to provide a better service-learning experience. This group includes social advocate organizations, major charities, at risk agencies and help organizations (e.g. legal aid). These agencies tend to be culturally diverse and provide students with an opportunity to better experience a community's social, health, and political

concerns. Working at these agencies tend to be more eye opening for students and provide a greater impact on their developing values, ideals, and morals.

Other site selection concerns include the location of the agency and physical facilities. Student safety must be a concern and care taken not to place an intern at risk when traveling to and from or while working at an agency. While no location is totally secure, internship and service-learning coordinators need to be aware of the risks and consider this when selecting work stations

### **Objectives, goals, and assignments**

Under service-learning, the needs of the community or agency dictate the service that needs to be performed. What is difficult is setting up a program that fosters learning and, at the same time, provides the required service to those in need. Community service agencies may not be familiar with the concept of an internship and end up treating interns as they would any other volunteer help. Experiences may not be structured around learning objectives, a characteristic of traditional internships. This can result in a work experience with little or no structure and too much repetitive activity, such as telephone solicitation, data entry, or filing. Learning requirements associated with internships require student interns to be treated differently than a volunteer. Volunteers are there to perform some required tasks; the intern is there to engage in a progressive learning experience. In some cases, they may actually perform similar activity, but the tasks are approached from different perspectives.

To assist in overcoming this barrier, agencies need to submit proposals for internships describing how the student will be utilized and the type of activities they will perform. Emphasis is placed on the progressive nature of the learning experience along with the ability to build new skills and apply academic concepts. Such proposals force the agency to think through a project or series of activities which would lead to a desired goal for the organization. Ultimately, work stations should be selected based on the clarity of activities and goals for the internship and their relevance for a marketing major.

To insure compliance with job descriptions interns, work station supervisors, and an internship coordinator should develop a list of learning objectives for the student. These can revolve around increased awareness, better understanding, and a stronger appreciation for the agency and its clientele. Objectives can be approved by the internship

coordinator and become the basis for ultimate evaluation of the internship experience.

### **Supervision**

Perhaps one of the major disadvantages of using non-profits for internships is a potential lack of mentoring and supervision. When selecting an agency, it is preferable to choose one that has available personnel with some degree of marketing experience. An extremely busy executive director heads many agencies. Finding time to work with an intern is very difficult. The result is students are often left to their own devices and with a staff of part time volunteers lacking in any marketing education. Unfortunately, this often leads to the use of the intern in a manner contrary to the position description and established objectives. In other cases, the intern *becomes* the marketing department and is overwhelmed in the process. To avoid these problems, the agreement with the agency should include a requirement for regular meetings between the intern and supervisor. In addition, having the intern work with news media, advertising agencies, event coordinators, and other marketing professional helps provide the required exposure to marketing skills. Previous interns are an excellent sources of information regarding the extent to which mentoring was provided.

### **Use of Reflective Activities**

Community service, in itself, can be meaningful, pointless, or harmful. Reflective activities are a key to getting meaning from a service experience. Reflection is a process by which service-learners think critically about their experiences. It can occur through writing, speaking, listening, or reading about the service experiences. Perhaps the most common reflective activity is the daily or weekly journal of observations, concerns, insights, doubts, fears, and critical questions about issues, people, and, most importantly, the intern themselves. The most important ingredient of a journal is honesty.

Care must be taken to require reflective activities that force students to answer questions like: What have I learned about myself through this experience? Do I have more/less understanding or empathy than I did before this experience? In what ways, if any, has your sense of self, your values, your sense of "community," your willingness to serve others and your self-confidence/self-esteem been impacted or altered through this experience? How has this experience challenged stereotypes or prejudices you

have/had? Any realizations, insights, or especially strong lessons learned. It is in the process of answering questions like these that the student begins to realize what they really "learned" from the internship (Cooper 1997).

### **ADVANTAGES OF SERVICE-LEARNING MARKETING INTERNSHIPS**

Educators and businesses alike are increasingly aware of the growing significance of cultural factors in the conduct of business. Business school must find ways for a student to learn to function within a diverse work force (Zlotkowski 1996b). Working at non-profit agencies can help develop a multicultural sensitivity that will help students not only accept but actually value a diverse work force (McLaughlin 1989). Organizations which provide help to disadvantaged and, at-risk groups are particularly appropriate. Examples include Boys and Girls Clubs, legal aid, and immigrant support groups. Research shows that undergraduate service participation strengthens the student's interest in issues relating to multiculturalism and diversity (Sax, Astin, and Astin 1996).

A second advantage stems from the fact that business students sometimes have problems dealing with uncertainty. Given a problem to solve and a framework within which to solve it, they often perform admirably. Unfortunately, they must learn to find and frame what needs to be done, not just choose between options in an already delimited field. Traditional internships aimed at enhancing technical skills often do not force the student to deal with ambiguity. One of the characteristics of community service internships is that they tend to be somewhat unstructured. Thus, a problem with these internships actually can become an opportunity for students to engage in problem identification and problem solving in a "messy" environment.

Student evaluations of service-learning marketing internships have identified networking opportunities as one of the unexpected benefits. Since many marketing students work on planning and implementing fund raising events, they often solicit and work with sponsors of those events, including local media personnel. Also, interns invited to participate in planning sessions are given an opportunity to meet and discuss plans with major business and community leaders. Finally, attendance at donor appreciation functions proved to be yet another chance to get to know some of

the major donors and community minded individuals.

Finally, research shows that a number of positive outcomes occur when service-learning is integrated into the curriculum. Findings in a recent study indicate that undergraduate participation in service based programs favorably affects "persistence in college, interest in graduate study, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, and a commitment to promoting racial understanding (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1996)." Other research supports the contention that service-learning has a positive impact on personal, attitudinal, moral, social, and cognitive outcomes (Cohen and Kinsey 1994, Giles and Eyster 1994). Reflective comments support these studies as students report some eye opening experiences associated with their internships. In addition, almost every student who has participated in a service-learning internship has devoted time well beyond what was required to obtain the academic credit. This, in itself, indicates the positive effect of these experiences.

### **SUMMARY**

Higher education is being called upon to rethink its mission to include the development of the "whole" student. Service-learning is one proven method of instilling a sense of community value in young people today. However, the key to the institutionalizing of service-learning is to incorporate it into the academic curriculum across campus. Business schools and more specifically, marketing departments, can do their part by developing service components for courses and majors. When properly supervised and structured to meet academic requirements, the combination of internships and service-learning can produce learning outcomes that often exceed those provided through traditional assignments.

### **REFERENCES**

The entire paper, including references, is available from the author.