

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN A PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING COURSE: SOME EMPIRICAL RESULTS

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ABSTRACT

The use of service-learning in a Principles of Marketing course provides an opportunity to expose students to the needs of their community as well as enhance academic material. This paper documents the details of an actual service assignment, which combined in-class readings and discussions with 15 hours of service to a nonprofit organization. The impact of the exercise is examined through the use of a post assignment student survey. While all of the goals were met to some degree, the greatest impact was on the student's awareness of community needs and how they could help fulfill these needs. In addition, the project appears to have increased their understanding of marketing and how it can be used in everyday life.

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning, a form of experiential education, has been receiving a significant amount of attention in recent years at the university level. In some states, including California, public colleges and universities are being challenged to increase student involvement in community related activities (Davis 1999). Carefully designed and executed service-learning courses and assignments are also providing universities with the opportunity to reach their goal of becoming more interactive. The author's university has as part of its vision to be "one of the nation's premier interactive universities." One aspect of this interactivity relates to the involvement of students with and support of the local community. Academically, these activities permit students to learn and develop through service that meets the needs of the community while being integrated into the curriculum. Students truly learn while they serve. For these reasons, many educators agree that service-learning is a valuable pedagogy.

Some disciplines and academic departments have had difficulty integrating or sustaining service-learning because of a lack of objective data supporting its positive impact on students and the community. While there is agreement on the potential benefits of service-learning in disciplines such as marketing, there is limited evidence of its specific impact on educational outcomes. Since there are a number of different approaches that

might be appropriate in marketing, it is important to determine if service-learning assignments are achieving the desired results. The purpose of the following paper is to identify the benefits associated with a specific service-learning assignment in a principle of marketing course. In addition, the results of a student survey conducted to determine the extent to which those benefits were achieved are presented. Finally, avenues for further research on the impact of service-learning are explored. Based on this type of research, marketing educators can begin to identify the role service-learning activities can play in meeting one or more educational objectives.

BENEFITS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

The challenge to develop appropriate assessment methods for service-learning activities is complicated by a number of factors (Driscoll et al. 1998). Among these factors is the lack of agreement regarding the desired outcomes of service-learning. The primary benefits associated with service-learning for business students have been enumerated (Tucker et al. 1998; Kohis 1996; Kenworthy 1996; Zlotkowski 1996). In addition, several writers have examined how marketing students can directly benefit from service-learning activities (Petkus 2000; Sherwood and Nordstrom 2000; Easterling and Rudell 1997). In general, these benefits revolve around enhanced knowledge of subject material, career awareness, skill development, appreciation for diversity, unstructured problem solving, and an understanding of community needs. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that ties specific service-learning activities to these alleged benefits. What research does exist tends to be general in nature, leading some business and marketing faculty to feel that this type of experiential activity belongs in general education, not in the business school. For example, it has been reported that service integrated with classroom curriculum results in a persistence in college, interest in graduate study, enhanced critical thinking and leadership skills, and a commitment to promoting racial understanding (Astin 1996). Other benefits that have been cited are the recognition of the need for and a commitment to volunteer service as well as an understanding of hardships faced by others (Cohen and Raupp 1992). These altruistic benefits, while certainly valuable, are not usually

sufficient to convince a marketing professor that service-learning belong in his or her course. However, there are a number of outcomes that are highly relevant for marketing and other business students.

The specific learning outcomes from service-learning are tied directly to the model of service-learning employed. Cone identifies six models of service-learning, two of which are appropriate for a principles of marketing course: the Discipline-Based Service-Learning (DBSL) and the Problem-Based Service-Learning (PBSL) models (Cone 2001). Utilizing the former model, students work at assigned service sites for a given number of hours throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis using course content for their analysis. For example, a student might work for the Leukemia Society helping them plan and execute informational meetings for the organization's Team-in-Training fundraising marathons. As the semester progresses, the student can reflect through class discussions, a journal, or reports on how different target markets might be identified and reached using various promotional tactics. The actual work might involve helping to set up and implement meetings, following up with potential participants, and helping to distribute agency educational materials. The PBSL model is more of a project based activity where individual or teams of students act as consultants to the community organization by working on a specific problem or issue. For examples, students could help develop content for a web site, create a distribution plan for educational materials, or develop a plan to increase the number of student donors at a blood drive.

DESIRED OUTCOMES OF SERVICE-LEARNING ASSIGNMENT

Based on existing research and the two models just described, the following desired outcomes were established for the service-learning assignment:

1. Increased awareness of community needs, involvement in the community and commitment to service. Students are often unaware of the needs of the community in which they live. This is particularly true of students who work full or part time while attempting to complete a college degree. By exposing the students to their own work site and through the reflections of other students, a greater degree of community awareness is created. In addition, one of the primary goals of service-learning is to instill a desire to serve the community. Even if students are aware of community needs, they are often reluctant to take the first step necessary to participate. How-

ever, once participation occurs, many individuals often develop a greater desire to provide service in the long run.

2. Awareness of opportunities for career development and employment in the nonprofit sector. The social sector provides a wide variety of potential employment opportunities for students studying marketing. An increasing number of nonprofit organizations are adopting common marketing practices and expanding their staffs to include marketing specialists. Most students entering business schools are totally unaware of this trend or these opportunities. In addition, through appropriate readings and discussions, students can be made aware of the role that community service can play in career development and advancement. Many companies today expect participation in community service and often look for service activities on potential employee resumes.

3. Better understanding of the basic principles of marketing. This is the learning half of service-learning. By having students work at a nonprofit or on an applied, community based project, the instructor can draw on those experiences to add relevance to textbook theory.

4. Greater sensitivity to diversity. Many community agencies deal with individuals from different cultures, social and educational backgrounds, and economic circumstances. As a result the service-learning assignment often provides marketing students with the challenge to effectively work with people who have a completely different outlook on life.

5. Personal benefits. In addition to subject knowledge and community awareness, students can potentially enhance leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. Depending on the work site, students can also become more aware of their own biases and feelings as a result of the service-learning assignment. Finally, the ability to assist others often results in a boost in the individual's self esteem. Many students do not realize just how valuable an asset they can be for a struggling community service agency.

THE SERVICE-LEARNING ASSIGNMENT

The service-learning project developed for the basic marketing course is comprised of six steps.

1. Introduction to the importance of community service and service-learning. Several articles are assigned and discussed explaining the concept of

service-learning in education (Furco 1996, Zlotkowski 1996), the role community service can play in career development (Poe 2000, Loeb 1996), and the benefits to a company from community involvement (Miller 1997, Hein and Miele 1998).

2. Application of marketing principles in nonprofit organizations. Since the service-learning project is assigned early in the course, a reading discussing how nonprofits utilize marketing is provided (Gallagher and Weinberg 1991). Emphasis is placed on the role of marketing in attracting volunteers, serving constituents, obtaining resources, and building community awareness. This reading and subsequent discussion helps students understand that nonprofit marketing is more than simply fundraising.

3. Service assignment. Students are required to provide a minimum of fifteen hours of service to a local nonprofit agency. Two types of activities, based on the two models previously discussed, are acceptable. For team project assignments, arrangements are made in advance with a number of agencies to insure that they are both willing and able to utilize students on a meaningful marketing project. Individuals wishing to work alone select from a list of agencies that have identified a variety of ongoing tasks, which are acceptable for the length of required service.

4. On-going discussion. Whenever possible, marketing topics are punctuated by having students discuss the application of that topic in the nonprofit sector. The variety of agencies and activities assures a number of excellent examples that the students are able to share.

5. Report and reflection. Students write a report outlining what they learned about the agency and its mission, how principles of marketing are being utilized, suggestions for improvement in the marketing effort, and a list of useful Internet resources relating to nonprofit marketing. The report also includes a section in which students reflect upon their experience and any impact it had on their feelings about nonprofit agencies, volunteering, community needs, or the needs of others.

6. Debriefing. Finally, one class session at the end of the semester is devoted to the sharing of experiences and feelings about the assignment and its outcomes. As part of that debriefing, a questionnaire is administered to determine the extent to which the desired outcomes were achieved.

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A questionnaire was developed utilizing questions from a survey instrument designed for assessing the impact of service-learning by the Center for Academic Excellence at Portland State University (Driscoll, et.al. 1998). Some adjustments were made to incorporate questions relevant to the specific course and nature of the assignment. Actual questions are provided in the Appendix. Each question was matched with one of the five original objectives to insure that all learning outcomes were assessed to some degree. Students were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with twenty statements on a five point scale with five being "strongly agree." During the 2000-01 academic year, responses were obtained from 242 students in six sections of the Principles of Marketing course utilizing the service-learning assignment. Table 1 presents the abbreviated question topic along with its associated outcome objective, the mean and standard deviation for each question as well as the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. The results are sorted, with the statements reflected the greatest degree of agreement listed first.

TABLE 1
STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Q#	Question Topic/Objective	Mean	SD	%*
5	Showed how to be involved-1	4.63	.55	97%
17	Marketing is used every day-3	4.44	.98	85%
10	Dealing with other cultures-4	4.43	.88	88%
14	Made a contribution-1	4.40	.73	85%
7	Will continue to volunteer-1	4.18	1.0	78%
12	Helped self esteem-5	4.17	.89	82%
1	Better understood course-3	4.12	.65	84%
18	Better than traditional project-3	4.06	.55	83%
8	More aware of needs-1	4.06	.84	77%
19	Made me more marketable-2	4.02	.69	79%
16	Enhanced communication-3	4.01	.77	79%
20	Career awareness-2	4.00	.94	80%
2	Understanding of people-5	3.98	.86	73%
4	Should use more-3	3.97	.94	73%
13	Volunteer at same agency-1	3.94	1.1	71%
3	Learn more about diversity-4	3.64	1.1	51%
9	Define strengths/weakness-5	3.37	.92	44%
11	More aware of bias-5	3.07	1.0	36%
15	Enhanced leadership skills-5	2.95	1.1	40%
6	Was already volunteering-1	2.57	1.5	30%

*Indicates percentage of students answering agree or strongly agree

All five objectives or student learning outcomes were achieved to some extent. The greatest impact, however, was on student awareness of and commitment to community needs. Three of the top five

statements related to this goal. These results, as well as student discussions, revealed that the primary benefit of the exercise was to show them how they could become more involved in their community. This did not just relate to where they could volunteer but also how they could assist the non-profit organizations. Whereas they might have originally thought volunteer work was primarily comprised of mundane tasks, this assignment allowed them to engage in and become aware of more useful activities. A second goal that appears to have been met relates to the application of marketing principles. On three of the statements dealing with learning of course content, approximately 85% of the students felt the assignment accomplished that purpose. As will be noted later, even if students didn't learn more about marketing than they would have using some alternative project, the service-learning assignment definitely produces other valuable outcomes.

The assignment's impact on student personal feelings, biases, and appreciation for diversity had mixed results. While a number of these outcomes were rated lower, the standard deviations indicate a wider variation of results. Student feedback revealed that the nature of the specific assignment had a major impact on these outcomes. Students who were more directly involved with an agency's clients tended to be more personally affected by the experience. On the other hand, when a team worked more directly with an organization's management staff, there was less impact on personal factors. For example, students whose assignment required them to interact with the children at the Boys and Girls Club were more personally affected than those who designed a promotional program to attract more donors for the same club. Survey results as well as student reflections also emphasized the positive impact the assignment had on self-esteem. Students, in general, felt they had made a contribution to the organization and reported that this made them feel better about themselves. A common reaction was that they now realized that they really did have something to offer and could make a difference.

The objective dealing with expanded career awareness and an understanding of the value of service for career development appears to also have been achieved. During the debriefing period it was determined that these outcomes were primarily a result of the required readings rather than anything that was learned or observed during the actual service. Finally, one particularly heartening result was the percentage of students who reported that the assignment had an impact on their commitment to

perform volunteer service. Whereas only 30% indicated that they were volunteering to some extent before the course, 78% responded that they would probably continue to volunteer after the course.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this study indicate that the use of service-learning in a basic marketing course has some definite educational benefits. Post assignment surveys, such as the one described in this article, provide some insight into the nature and extent of those benefits. However, additional research is necessary to evaluate the full range of reasons for using service-learning assignments. Such research might include the following:

1. Pre and post test of personal feelings toward community service. The survey used in this study only tested students after the completion of their assignment. Impact of the activity on certain factors, especially personal feelings, would be better measured using a pre and posttest instrument.

2. Assessment of the impact of student work on the community based organizations. Little if any research exists which examines the costs versus benefits of student work at the nonprofit agency. This is especially true with respect to the consulting project type of activity. One of the drawbacks of the problem-based model is that the limited number of hours involved reduces the likelihood that proposed solutions fully address the problem at hand (Cone 2001). The overall value of the method is reduced if the "service" half of service-learning proves to be inadequate.

3. Assessment of the quality of the student work. Student outcomes assessment requires some evaluation of student learning and abilities by external parties. Service-learning assignments provide an excellent opportunity for assessing a number of student characteristics and skills. Such assessment can become an important element of a student's portfolio.

4. More specific assessment of individual service-learning assignments. In this experiment, two different models of service-learning were used. In addition, the primary contact for the student or student team varied according to the individual assignment (e.g. other volunteers, agency staff, clientele, etc.). Such mixing of models within the same class make it difficult to determine the effect of the specific experience on the different objectives. More control of assignments is necessary to better isolate its impact on student outcomes.

5. Understanding of course content. While students felt that the service-learning assignment helped them to better understand the principles of marketing, they really had no basis for comparison. A powerful argument for service-learning would be that student learning in marketing is greater when this technique is utilized. This would require some type of experiment involving other sections of the same course in which more traditional projects were assigned. Even if it was determined that there was no difference; the non-academic benefits associated with service-learning should bolster its use.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to provide some empirical evidence of the benefits of a service-learning assignment in a Principles of Marketing course. Five general objectives were established for the project, which required readings, class discussions, fifteen hours of service, and a written report. Both the discipline and problem based models of service-learning were utilized. Results of a student self administered questionnaire indicated the all of the desired outcomes were achieved to some degree. The greatest impact of the project was an expansion of student awareness of how they can contribute to their community and their commitment to volunteering. Students also reported that the assignment definitely enhanced their understanding of marketing and how it could be applied, not only at nonprofits, but also in every day life. Mixed results on the effect of the assignment on personal characteristics reflect the impact of the model chosen for the project (i.e. discipline or project based). Overall, while the results are very positive, they only reflect one measurable aspect of the service-learning experience. Changes in perceptions, impact on service agencies, assessment of student work, and evaluation of different models are all areas that can be investigated further. Initial results, however, do indicate that service-learning can definitely enhance the educational experience in marketing.

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17. The service-learning project helped me to see how marketing can be used in everyday life.

18. I feel I learned more about marketing by doing the community service than I would have through more traditional classroom or library projects.

19. The work I accomplished in this course has made me more marketable when I graduate.

20. The service-learning assignment made me more aware of possible career opportunities in the non-profit sector

APPENDIX

Service-Learning Student Survey Questions

1. The service-learning project helped me to better understand the lectures, readings, and content of this course.
2. The service learning assignment expanded my understanding of people, in general.
3. The service-learning assignment enabled me to learn more about diversity.
4. Service-learning assignments should be used in more classes at our business school.
5. The community participation aspect of this course showed me how I can become more involved in my community.
6. I was already volunteering in my community before taking this course.
7. I probably will continue to volunteer in the community after this course.
8. This assignment helped me become more aware of the needs in my community.
9. Doing the service-learning assignment helped me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses.
10. I was comfortable working with cultures other than my own.
11. This assignment helped me to become more aware of my own biases and prejudices.
12. Doing service-learning has a positive effect on my self esteem.
13. I intend to continue performing service at the agency I worked at for this assignment.
14. I feel that the work I did made a contribution to the organization I served.
15. The work I performed for this assignment enhanced my leadership skills.
16. The service-learning assignment enhanced my ability to communicate my ideas in a real world context.