

Business Unusual: Transforming Business School Curricula through Community Engagement

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Abstract

As part of a Community Service-Learning Faculty Scholars Program, University of San Diego business faculty members created community engagement projects that connected students with the local community, exposed them to the realities of a global business world and showed the inherent value of community engagement. By utilizing service-learning and community engagement, these faculty members are creating a new vision for higher education while actively demonstrating the importance of partnering with local business.

CSL in the Business School / Beyond the Pinstripe Suit

The “primacy of experience” was fundamental to John Dewey’s ideas about education (1938), and this concept has found a new life via the service-learning programs implemented at campuses across the world. Service-learning is an educational approach that allows faculty to “design student projects that are broad in scope yet directed in purpose” (Vega 2007, 647) and allows students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world problems (Kenworthy-U’Ren and Peterson 2005). According to the Director of the U.S. National Service-Learning Clearing House, “Service-learning is all in the hyphen. It is the enrichment of specific learning goals through structured community service opportunities that respond to community-identified needs and opportunities” (Kenworthy-U’Ren, Taylor, and Petri 2006, 121). The benefits of implementing service-learning have been well documented over the past 20 years. Service-learning has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes in students including helping them better prepare for careers (Ondaatje, Grey, and Fricker 2000), increasing their personal efficacy, growth, and self-esteem (Primavera 1999), and improving communication skills (Leung, Liu, Wang, and Chen 2006). When service-learning is used in conjunction with theory-based reflection and content mastery, it is able to create a higher level of learning for students than possible through a purely lecture format (Kenworthy-U’Ren and Peterson 2005). Additionally, experiential exercises (i.e., community engagement projects) have a variety of positive impacts including longer retention of material over time (Sims 2002), and they are an effective way to prepare

students for ethical dilemmas that they might encounter in the workplace (Sanyal 2000; Zlotkowski 1996).

“Students should not wait to apply what they have learned until after completing school” (Simms and Brinkmann 2002, 70). One way to aid in this application is the use of community engagement projects. Community engagement is an umbrella term that covers a variety of work including service-learning, and potential outcomes from this type of activity include developing adaptability and flexibility (Vega 2007). Community engagement has the potential of increasing the cognitive investment by students through their active participation and emotional involvement in their own learning (Chapman 2003). Not only can community engagement potentially generate high-quality learning, but it also can move students beyond knowledge and understanding to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Australian Council on Educational Research 2008; Bloom 1956). Community engagement is well-suited for business students because it comes with the responsibility to model professionalism as they are developing actual skills and have the potential for job opportunities with these organizations (Godfrey, Illes, and Berry 2005). This approach also allows students to better understand the outcomes of business activity (Fleckenstein 1997; Sims 2002) and can create a variety of experiences including: personal insight, application of skills, and understanding social issues and transformational learning (Kolenko et al. 1996). Putting students in situations that span organization functions allows them to understand the variety of demands and interests that must be fulfilled for multiple stakeholders and places them in the center of their own learning (Godfrey, Illes, and Berry 2005; Mezirow 2000).

Community Service-Learning Faculty Scholars

As business schools across the country strive to give their students a competitive edge, innovative pedagogical methods are being integrated into the curriculum. Community service-learning is a powerful pedagogical and learning strategy that integrates meaningful public service with academic instruction and reflection to create a vibrant learning environment. As a private, Catholic institution, the University of San Diego has a strong tradition for community engagement and created a Center for Community Service-Learning (CSL) in 1986. What began as a “Volunteer Resources Office” was transformed in the 1990s to a community service-learning office that assisted in the development of a course-based service-learning program connecting faculty with community partners, sponsored curriculum development workshops, and funding for course revisions and facilitated logistical responsibilities through a student leadership program. By 2006, the center had a vision to create a new program that would help reach a higher level of engagement with faculty and the community. This vision was the major impetus for establishing the Community Service-Learning Scholars Program. Underlying this program was the belief that when students interact with the community in a significant way, *deep learning* occurs as students connect classroom theory with their community-based experiences.

Thus, the objectives of the scholars program was to create an interdisciplinary community to explore the process of incorporating community service-learning in the curriculum, to assess outcomes, to present at conferences, to conduct research, and to turn that service into scholarship for publication. To help faculty scholars create meaningful campus-community connections, workshops on various aspects of community engagement, on establishing partnerships, on assessment techniques, and on pedagogical strategies were offered throughout the year-long program by the faculty liaison, Judith Liu, and the center’s director, Elaine Elliott (2006–2010) and Chris Nayve (2010–present).

Scholars were provided with binders that contained readings relevant to CSL, on effective means of preparing students for their experiences, on syllabus construction, on effective reflection techniques, and on assessment. These binders, along with the workshops, were designed to provide the scholars with a “toolkit” of useful materials and theoretical grounding for community service-learning and engagement.

Table 1: Workshop and binder content.

CSL Basics	What Is CSL? Syllabus Construction Catholic Social Tradition
Transforming Courses	“OPERA” Objectives Partnerships Engagement Reflection Assessment (Marshall Welch 2010)
Reflection and Assessment	“ABCs” of Reflection Affect Behavior Cognition/Content (Marshall Welch 2010)

In 2009, the scholars program itself was revised to further deepen its goals. Although earlier cohorts were composed of faculty members from across campus, the center decided to strategically target certain departments and academic units that had few courses that incorporated service-learning. The School of Business Administration (SBA) was chosen because of the number of students who major or minor in the

subject matter, and because its corporate social responsibility ethic is an integral part of its mission. Two assistant professors who teach on both the undergraduate (lower- and upper-division) and graduate level were chosen because of the breadth and depth of the courses they teach and their research interests: ethics and marketing. Professors Tara Ceranic and Kristine Ehrich were invited to be the 2009–2010 scholars. These two faculty members transformed their courses by translating what they were learning in the scholars program into concrete curricular changes by embedding community service-learning.

Diving Deep

Service-learning in business schools has been addressed by several researchers (Andrews 2007; Berry and Letty 2007; Holtzman, Stewart, and Barr 2008; Manring 2004; McIntyre, Webb, and Hite 2005; Simms 2002; Vega 2007; Zlotkowski 1996), and many respected universities are using this approach. For example, Duquesne University's Palumbo Donahue School of Business focuses on a combination of community outreach and service for the greater good of its students and community, while the University of St. Thomas has a required undergraduate course titled "Learning through Service." Marketing classes at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and at St. John's University incorporate service-learning into their coursework and Cornell University offers several business courses with service-learning components.

The mission of the SBA at the University of San Diego is to "develop socially responsible business leaders with a global mindset through academically rigorous, relevant, and values-based education and research." Service-learning seemed to be an ideal way to put this mission into practice; however, it was not a pedagogical technique currently being employed in the SBA. In order to address this gap, the two SBA faculty scholars created ways to incorporate service-learning into their courses. Following are the specific approaches they designed.

Transforming a Business and Society Curriculum

Business and Society is a course that primarily serves as the required business ethics course for all SBA undergraduates, and it directly links to the mission of the SBA. However, it does not deal solely with business ethics. The course addresses a variety of topics ranging from diversity, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability; all tied together with a thread of ethics and ethical decision-making. With new and bigger ethics scandals appearing in the headlines, it is imperative that we understand what actually will work to get students interested in the positive impacts of ethics in business. As educators, we have a unique opportunity to radically shift our pedagogies to meet the needs of today's business students.

Giacalone and Thompson (2006) suggest that management students in business schools face a "basic underlying worldview—a worldview that undermines and countermands the most basic tenants of ethics and social responsibility" (266–267). This

“organization-centered” worldview places business at the center of society and money at the pinnacle of importance yielding decision-making and behaviors fraught with materialism and self-interest (Giacalone and Thompson 2006). Additionally, Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) argue that the current business school system offers students a functionally-based education that does not adequately prepare students for decision-making and interactions in the real world. Some faculty turned to community engagement to combat these issues. In fact, in 1996 the *Journal of Business Ethics* published a special issue titled “Community Involvement and Service Learning Projects.” More than ten years later, a review of the field since that special issue found that service-learning has played an important role in the field, and, in fact has been represented on the annual program of the Academy of Management meeting every year since 1997. In 2001, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* needed to double the number of issues published annually due to the interest in this pedagogical approach (Kenworthy-U’Ren 2008).

Given the apparent worldview of business students and a perceived lack of preparation for the real world, Professor Ceranic decided to transform her approach to the course in a way that would address these issues by creating a community engagement project. In the resultant “metaproject,” “students provide service as a group based on competence in their academic studies, applying skill they had learned on a theoretical level to actual problems in the community” (Vega 2007, 653). Traditionally, community engagement and service-learning projects deal with non-profit organizations or direct service agencies. However, the community with which Business and Society students could best engage in a reciprocal relationship was the local business community; therefore, students worked with a variety of organizations depending on their interests. Organizations students worked with included a variety of small, large, for- and non-profits. Some of the recent organizations have included Starbucks, Stone Brewing Company, The Ultimate Fighting Championship, Father Joe’s Villages, Deloitte, Callaway Golf, Petco, San Diego Humane Society, Qualcomm, The Human Rights Commission, KPMG, Intuit, Macy’s, Nordstrom, Iniji, Yard House, Lukeima and Lymphoma Society, Jamba Juice, Zappos, Chipotle, Lambesis, Chick-fil-A, Lowes Hotel, and Coca-Cola.

Students were required to work in teams of five to assess various aspects of the organization they had selected. As a team they conducted an interview with their organizational contact in which questions were vetted by the professor and submitted to the contact prior to the interview, ensuring that proper research was conducted. They also created a final presentation, which provided an organizational overview, its strengths and weaknesses, and students’ suggestions for improvement. In addition, each team member was assigned individually to complete one of the following assignments: stakeholder assessment/map, organizational culture assessment, ethics policy assessment, diversity policy assessment, or corporate social responsibility/sustainability program assessment. Due to the nature of the organizations, some of the policies/programs the students must assess may not exist. For example, many small start-ups do not have diversity or ethics policies in place, and each student had to create and write one for them by benchmarking against other similar organizations. Following

the completion of the five separate assessment papers, a class period was designated for peer-to-peer consulting. This allowed each team member to informally present his/her paper and findings to the rest of the team so that each team member fully understood every component of the project and was prepared to create their final team presentation. Many of the learning objectives of the course link specifically to the assignments associated with the community engagement project. Table 2 details these connections.

Table 2: Business and society learning objectives and corresponding assignments.

Course Learning Objective	Assignment
Illustrate the importance of stakeholders to decision-making via stakeholder mapping.	Stakeholder Analysis
Identify and formulate effective diversity and ethics policies.	Diversity Policy Evaluation Ethics Policy Evaluation
Distinguish components of successful corporate social responsibility/sustainability programs and offer suggestions for program enhancement and development	CSR/Sustainability Analysis
Distinguish the attributes of an effectively run organization.	Final Team Presentation

Finally, at the end of the semester, students wrote a course reaction paper that was a reflection on their experience of working with a local organization. Student responses to the course reaction paper confirmed their excitement for engaging with actual local organizations. “Linking course concepts to Deloitte undoubtedly fostered my understanding of the essential themes behind the study of business ethics. Analyzing a real company’s stances on key issues highlighted their importance beyond classroom study.” The papers also spoke to overall student satisfaction and learning. One student commented, “I think it has been the most proficient type of learning I have encountered in the business school at USD,” and another noted, “When linking course concepts to our industry, more specifically our firm, it set [a] fantastic foundation for success.”

Additionally, all of the organizations expressed their appreciation for the suggestions and input from the students, and many offered to participate in the future. One company contact said, “Thank you for sending over the presentation. It was interesting seeing our company from a different perspective.” This reciprocity is key to service-learning and instilling a sense of commitment in students. The interaction between students and individuals in local organizations allows for the real world experience that is often lacking in a typical business course.

Transforming Marketing Curriculum

As a course that examines the broader role of marketing in society and investigates the responsibilities of marketers to key constituents including customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, and the local as well as global community, Public Policy and

Marketing was an ideal course for Professor Ehrich to transform. One learning objective of the course was for students to recognize ways that marketing impacts the welfare of society while at the same time assessing ways in which corporations can give back to the community in which they operate. To this end, two of the many areas that were explored during the semester were marketing to the less advantaged and corporate social responsibility (CSR). During this exploration, the class read Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. To examine the difficulties faced by the working poor and their inability to survive on minimum wage jobs, journalist Ehrenreich worked in several low-wage occupations. This reading had a profound impact on students when they realized just how difficult it is to "get by" on what many Americans earn, as evidenced by a student's comment in a reflection paper:

"Reading *Nickel and Dimed* in this class was the first time I had really spent time thinking about how hard it is for people to get by without sufficient funds. It still dumbfounds me that it is possible for a person to work over forty hours a week and still not have enough money to feed, shelter, and care for themselves."

In the first three to four weeks of Professor Ehrich's course, a firm foundation in marketing ethics and the need for corporate social responsibility (CSR) were established. To illustrate (1) issues of Catholic social thought teachings (e.g., the needs and interests of the poor, marginalized and dispossessed among us have a moral priority deriving from the essential unity of all humankind), and (2) how the real-life responsibilities of marketers must take community needs into consideration, this project required students to closely examine their local community. Students worked in self-designated teams of four and were asked to scan their memories for knowledge of local businesses, perhaps one in which they had worked or had been a patron, where they had witnessed good food being wasted at the end of the day. They were asked to (1) contact a restaurant that was interested in helping the local community, (2) learn (by meeting with managers/workers/guests in the shop) what local organization or families might benefit from the food that would be otherwise disposed of, (3) organize the distribution of the food to these agencies or less fortunate families for the entire semester, (4) create a marketing campaign for the restaurant highlighting and publicizing the social responsibility demonstrated and community benefits provided, (5) report to the class on their progress twice throughout the project and present their result at the end of the semester, and (6) turn in a reaction paper following Marshal Welch's ABC guidelines (Appendix 1).

The marketing campaigns that each team created for their respective restaurants, demonstrating the ways in which the shop could help the community, varied. Some students created window posters for their clients that highlighted their involvement with the community. Other teams created Facebook pages and Twitter feeds emphasizing how these businesses connected to the actions. Some teams created business cards and flyers, promoting the socially responsible actions of the business, which the shops could use in the future.

As mentioned previously, each team was required to give oral progress reports twice throughout the semester. These discussions were held in class, in front of the other teams, in order to obtain critical feedback from both classmates and Professor Ehrlich. For instance, when one team encountered the problem of a corporate office not returning phone calls, another team that had a similar issue could provide the solutions that it had used to counter the challenge. One issue that repeatedly arose was that of a restaurant fearing liability should someone become ill from the donated food. This fear was partially alleviated by distributing, to these businesses, a copy of the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, H.R. 2428, that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996. This law facilitates the distribution of food to needy individuals and exempts those who recover (recovery is defined as collection of wholesome food for distribution to the poor and hungry) or donate apparently fit food and groceries from criminal or civil liability arising from those activities.

At the end of the semester, a formal presentation was given that outlined the entire project including the lessons learned, both intended and unintended. The intended learning objectives were for students to learn to help those less fortunate than themselves, to connect and to foster a sense of community within the local organizations with which they were working, and to create actual marketing campaigns for local businesses that focused on their support of the community (emphasizing the socially responsible actions of the corporations). Unintended outcomes were the development of persistence and perseverance. Facing a response of “no,” the students were neither deterred from soldiering on nor sank into despair. Instead, students learned that “no just means keep trying.” Other unintended consequences were the students’ realization that while some within an organization might want to do good, they are unable to if it is not part of the corporate culture and that it is, therefore, necessary to incorporate social responsibility throughout the organization, starting with top administration. An often reiterated, unintended consequence was that of, “Marketing is not just about coming up with a brilliant idea and then profiting from the idea but about being responsible in the way that we present and distribute products. It goes beyond the financial bottom line.” Individual reaction papers written by each student emphasized many insights from “this was a wake-up call, not an assignment” to the “realization that one does not need a big personality to make a difference, and the difference need not be big all at once but rather every little bit helps” as well as “I see CSR as a requirement for organizations, not a choice.” Perhaps the most common dawning awareness, however, was regarding how incredibly fortunate the marketing students realized they were after working with these organizations and the homeless and less fortunate population of San Diego. Far too many of our students (and faculty alike) walk through their daily lives thinking that they have got a rough go of it—thinking that the fact that they have to choose between eating at Urbane Café and Sushi Freak is a hard decision . . . not realizing that there are many in their very own city, nay their very own neighborhood, who have to choose between eating and feeding their children. These are the cognitive realizations that they came to me with at the end of the semester. The realization that they were extremely privileged to have been born into the family they were born into—and not into the one that is living down on the corner of Front and A streets. “I see that where we are in life is often a question of the circumstance we are born into and not solely how hard one works.”

Limitations

Research on implementing community engagement service-learning projects has indicated several barriers to such projects including faculty resistance, unsuccessful and/or negatively perceived project or program outcomes, selfish “limelight” issues on the part of involved faculty, personal agendas for faculty, and on-site resistance from community organizations (Kolenko et al. 1996). Although not all of these were concerns in our cases, we acknowledge that it is not possible or even recommended that all business faculty across the curriculum implement metaprojects such as the ones described in this paper. Designing courses that include a community engagement service-learning component is challenging and requires tremendous time commitments, preparation, and organization on the part of the faculty. These projects often must be managed closely to be sure that students do not burden the organizations with which they are working so that the desired learning outcomes are attained and students stay on track. In the SBA courses described in this paper, each professor faced particular challenges. For example, students in Business and Society initially did not arrange interviews early enough in the semester and found themselves scrambling at the end of the semester to complete assignments. As a result, it was necessary to closely manage the process in future semesters to keep students on track with assignments being scheduled throughout the semester to help students with project management and timing. Also, some students were uncomfortable with the majority of their course grade coming from a team-based project; however by adjusting the point values, this was addressed and lessened the concerns.

In Public Policy and Marketing, many teams encountered setbacks, difficulties, and disappointments ranging from unreturned phone calls and managers missing scheduled appointments to weaving through the roadblocks set up by corporate offices. However, not one student expressed a desire to give up; rather, in their oral reports and in their written reaction papers, they expressed how meaningful the project was and how much they learned from their efforts. Also, even with the Liability Act in place, unfortunately, some restaurants still felt liability and did not participate, leading to frustration for the students as well as unnecessarily wasted food. Hopefully, in the future, these can be alleviated with more education and sharing of information throughout the community. Service-learning projects are neither simple nor are they always straightforward, but with much time and effort by all involved, the benefits are large, both to the students and to the community (businesses and citizens, alike).

McIntyre, Webb, and Hite (2005) found that a majority of marketing departments surveyed came from universities that either did not have or did not know if they had a service-learning support center. Not having institutional support is a definite hindrance to those attempting to institute CSL into their coursework. Professional staff can help with the necessary logistics to create community partnerships; faculty working with faculty provides important mentorship; and the results of community engagement projects can be turned into scholarship. The projects discussed in this paper would not have been possible without the help of USD’s CSL Center and the CSL Faculty Scholars program.

Finally, unless the administration values community service-learning by including it in the retention, promotion, and tenure procedures, faculty members will be hesitant to incorporate service-learning until they have obtained tenure. Because every discipline has major journals dedicated to teaching and pedagogy, including scholarly research written about incorporating service-learning into the curriculum would be an important means of valuing and rewarding teaching innovation.

Conclusion

Service-learning projects that engage the community can be catalysts for change in a university community (Kenworthy-U'Ren and Peterson 2005). At the University of San Diego, its Community Service-Learning Faculty Scholars Program is a campus-wide initiative that seeks to help faculty members transform their curricula in a meaningful manner. By nurturing campus-community collaborations that meet both the needs of an organization and academic learning objectives, a win-win scenario is possible as evidenced by the efforts of two USD business school professors.

The value of creating metaprojects that intentionally seek to transform curricula through a community engagement, service-learning project is moving students to a different level of course content mastery. Working with real-life issues help students make critical connections with what they are learning in the classroom in concrete, substantial, and meaningful ways. Learning is not only deepened, but students are rewarded with a sense of efficacy that reading and lectures alone do not allow.

The incorporation of service-learning projects into the two SBA courses discussed here laid a foundation for future opportunities in other USD business courses as well. The faculty who taught these courses have given seminars to colleagues on ways in which to institute service-learning into their business classes, have met with administration in the school, and have presented the methods and findings at numerous pedagogical conferences. Additionally, the community engagement projects were designed specifically so that they could be replicated in other classes and in other areas of study. Although it may not be possible to implement exact replicas of these projects, it is possible to utilize the frameworks and rubrics created and apply them to different courses.

While the incorporation of CSL projects into business curriculum is not yet the norm within our institution or other business schools, it is gaining ground, and the benefits it provides have both been acknowledged and adopted. It has become evident that by providing service-learning opportunities to our business students, we are supporting the mission of the university and are furthering the impact that our students might have in the community not only while they are students but long after graduation.

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Appendix 1:

Public Policy and Marketing Reaction Paper

Please write a short (2 pages, single-spaced, 1 inch margins, 11 pt. font) reaction paper, describing your experience with the community based learning project that you did for this class. This should be an individual written account of your *observations and*

experiences while out in the community, *reflections* on those experiences, and an *analysis* of (in regards to the class topic—Public Policy and Marketing) those experiences. Please keep the following (ABCs) in mind as you write and address each of them as you explain the preceding points:

- **A (Affect):** What were you *feeling* while you were in the community? (I am NOT grading you on what you felt. I am grading you on whether or not you write about what you felt.). Tell me how you felt when you started the project, if your feelings changed as you worked through the semester, what frustrations you experienced, what happiness you experienced, if you were disappointed by anything or uplifted by anything, etc. Feel free to express emotions that I didn't mention above.
- **B (Behavior):** When or where have you experienced something similar to this in the past? Have you ever thought about participating in a project like this?
- **C (Cognition):** What concrete connection to class material/discussion can you make? In addition to what you were *feeling*, tell me what were you *thinking* about while you were out in the community and since then? What are you able to take away from this project, as a person and member of the USD/San Diego community? Do you think that it will shape your future behavior in any way?

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