Service-Learning in A Marketing Research Course: The Benefits that Accrue to Students

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Abstract: An important issue surrounds the impact of service-learning on the academic and life skill development of undergraduate students, and ultimately, their preparedness for the professional arena. Empirical research in this area is scarce, especially in marketing. Marketing Research is an important course and often requisite for an undergraduate marketing degree. Yet no research has explored the value of experiential learning in this course. This study serves to fill that void. The same questionnaire was administered to students using a pre- and post-test design who had completed a service-learning project. Utilizing a seven-point Likert scale, students were questioned about their intentions and attitudes toward volunteer work and involvement with their community. A paired t-test was employed to analyze the results, and it was found that there was a significant increase in their intention to volunteer and to become involved with their community. Moreover, significant increases in social responsibility, intent to help others and their confidence level with problem solving and conflict resolution were also found. One of the most significant outcomes was that students believed that they could make a difference in the world. The findings were a direct result of the experiential learning component integrated into the Marketing Research course.

Key words: service-learning, marketing pedagogy, experiential, research

1. Introduction

Volunteerism is consistent with the mindset, value system, and motivation of the Millennials or Generation Y segment, representing about 80 million or roughly 30 percent of the American population (Gerdes, 2006). Upon graduation, they gravitate towards companies with corporate cultures that stress social responsibility, diversity, and environment (Gerdes, 2006). Further, community service and serving the greater good are among their top priorities (Gerdes, 2008). In short, they strive to "do good, while doing well" (Gerdes, 2008, p. 1).

Blending civic engagement with academia is one of the challenges facing higher education during the 21st century. Colleges and universities are under pressure to revisit their historic commitment to service (Hinck & Brandell, 2000). Indeed, developing partnerships between the campus and external organizations is at the heart of renewing community engagement (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1999), and advancing civic responsibility (Gronski & Pigg, 2000). The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (hereafter referred to as "Stockton") has embraced

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this initiative; in fact, service-learning has been formally incorporated into the curriculum for well over a decade.

Marketing Research, a required course for all business students specializing in marketing, has been designed to weave a service-learning component into the curriculum since 1994. Real-world problems, data, and applications are taught in a real-world context; specifically, the course is used as a platform to advance institutional goals (i.e., evaluate student satisfaction with housing and amenities; gain insight about the commuter student experience; explore the most effective communication methods for disseminating information to the student body; etc.). The perspective is at odds with the traditional notion of service-learning that embodies a collaborative effort among faculty, students, and external organizations. The "external" organization, in this case, is Stockton, the academic institution where the business students are pursuing a bachelor's degree. The logistics of conducting a marketing research study on campus offers certain advantages that a traditional service-learning project does not. Students and the various Stockton constituencies they serve are "housed" on the same campus, streamlining the communication process and facilitating various research tasks such as experience surveys and focus groups. Moreover, all parties have a common goal; namely, to improve the quality of campus life.

Student teams apply the quantitative reasoning and marketing skills acquired in Marketing Research and other relevant coursework to topics of interest at the college. The students generate a comprehensive marketing research study, and interact with faculty, administrators, and staff throughout the semester as dictated by the project schedule. At the end of the semester, written and oral reports are delivered to the appropriate members of the Stockton community. The findings and recommendations of the student teams are used by the college to formulate action plans to secure funding for new initiatives (i.e., an on-campus shuttle service; use of electronic portfolios for performance assessment), and improve upon existing facilities/services (i.e., dining services and offerings). To date, 125 investigations have been undertaken, and the process has proved mutually beneficial. Students gain knowledge and experience through a primary marketing research study, and generate a high-quality report in the process for their portfolio (averaging about 100 pages). Stockton faculty, administrators, and staff are able to explore topics that have implications for the quality of student life at the college. Recognizing the "lifetime value of the [student] customer" has gained momentum in recent years in education marketing (Hayes, 1996). Marketing investments contribute to building enrollment and retention rates, and developing greater degrees of "customer" satisfaction.

It has been noted that service-learning is particularly relevant to marketing courses given the discipline's interest in social causes. Unfortunately, business faculty have been less inclined to incorporate the experiential method into their coursework than their social sciences and liberal arts counterparts (Klink & Athaide, 2004), although a review of the business literature noted that the field of marketing, among others, has numerous service-learning applications relative to course-earning objectives (Andrews, 2007). Further, in accordance with Kolb's experiential learning model, Petkus (2000) noted that advanced-level marketing courses "…can make an even greater contribution to the marketing efforts of a non-profit organization. Students at this level have a greater breadth and depth of marketing knowledge and skills… (from other course projects, internships, etc.) to draw on for reflection" (p. 65). A void exists in the literature relative to empirical explorations of service-learning in specific marketing courses. This was validated by Petkus (2000) in a review that examined the service-learning literature in marketing, and reiterated by Hagenbuch (2006).

Initially, a review of the service-learning literature is presented. It focuses on a definition of the service-learning construct, a brief overview of the foundations of service-learning, and empirical investigations that link the service-learning experience with desired outcomes such as satisfaction, enhanced sense of civic

responsibility, and academic and life skill development. Then, a discussion ensues about the structure and evolution of the Marketing Research course. Finally, the research design and empirical results are delineated.

2. Literature Review

The service-learning construct encompasses a teaching method that integrates community service with academic study. Service or experiential learning projects expand teaching and learning beyond traditional classroom activities into a real-world forum (Berson, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1998; Kinsley, 1994). Service-learning is defined as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs while simultaneously gaining a broader understanding of course content within a given discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Fertman (1994) proposed that the historical roots of service-learning may be traced to the philosophy of John Dewey. The seminal work of Dewey (1967) addressed the challenges associated with providing quality education in a democratic society. In drawing a connection between professional and public lives, he argued that education for a democratic way of life was essential for advancing society. Dewey's (1967) theories focused on experiential and citizenship education relative to community service and volunteerism.

Almost three decades later, The Wingspread Report (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993) noted that a gap continued to exist between societal needs and the offerings of higher education institutions. The Wingspread Report recommended that colleges and universities collectively endorse three basic objectives: taking values seriously, putting student learning first, and creating a nation of learners.

Building on the Wingspread Report (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993), Boyer (1994) reaffirmed the need for the higher education community to serve American society. Boyer encouraged research and discovery of new knowledge in addition to integrating, communicating, and applying knowledge through professional service (Coye, 1997). He called on members of the faculty to adopt a "reflective practitioners" mindset, oscillating between theory and practice to bring the daily problems of real people in real neighborhoods into the university classroom. Service "is not just something students do in their spare time; it connects back to the core curriculum and the search for shared values" (Boyer, 1990, p. 26). The growth of service-learning on college campuses during the 1990s is indicative of a renewed emphasis on campus-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004a).

The notion of civic responsibility is intertwined with a service-learning perspective. Civic engagement initiatives have awakened renewed interest in promoting institutional citizenship, building new campus-community programs, and promoting a broad sense of civic responsibility in higher education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

A literature review undertaken by Hervani and Helms (2004) indicated that service-learning has been applied in a wide variety of disciplines and courses including writing and composition, finance, engineering, psychology, science and mathematics, accounting, nursing, Spanish, political science, and liberal arts. Service-learning projects have also been developed for economics (Hervani & Helms, 2004), management (Angelidis et al., 2004; Madsen & Turnbull, 2006); marketing (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Petkus, 2000; Klink & Athaide, 2004; Barr, 2008a; Barr, 2008b), personal selling (Hagenbuch, 2006), and advertising (Lopez & Lee, 2005) courses.

Easterling and Rudell (1997) provided the first examination of service-learning in a marketing context. The authors developed an extensive background and justification for integrating service-learning into the marketing

curriculum as well as the benefits that accrue to all parties. A specific program is suggested for a marketing internship. Petkus (2000) extended the work of Easterling and Rudell (1997) into other facets of marketing including principles of marketing, marketing/management strategy, marketing research, personal selling/sales management, integrated marketing communications, and consumer behavior. It is noteworthy to mention that Petkus (2000) provided a general framework for the design and implementation of service-learning courses in marketing, and Hagenbuch (2006) and Barr (2008a, 2008b) advanced specific pedagogical models for personal selling, marketing research, and strategic marketing courses, respectively.

As noted earlier, the number of empirical investigations undertaken in marketing has been sparse. So a review of the empirical service-learning literature is warranted to determine the impact of the experiential technique on the academic and personal development of students, as well as other desired outcomes. It is noteworthy to mention that Gelmon (2000) stressed the need to establish a comprehensive research program to gain knowledge about service-learning assessment, including a conceptual framework of best practices principles (and necessary refinement), and operationalization of variables.

Service-learning outcomes have focused on two broad areas: (1) student outcomes related to intellectual skills; and, (2) student personal outcomes (Rama et al., 2000). The first taxonomy includes an assessment of cognitive competencies including traditional textbook knowledge, as well as critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Students engaged in service-learning projects are more inclined to resolve "real" problems that they consider significant and personally relevant. Moreover, they gain a greater understanding of course material due to the contextual relevance of the service-learning experience. And, ultimately, students are challenged to reevaluate or reaffirm their own perspectives as a result of interfacing with people from diverse backgrounds. The second classification, student personal outcomes, include an evaluation of various values-related qualities that may be enhanced due to the service-learning experience including honesty, ethical conduct, and a desire to foster constructive social change. Heightened self-awareness, appreciation of and tolerance for individuals from diverse backgrounds are potential positive personal outcomes. Likewise, students feel a stronger connection to the broader community, establishing relationships with site supervisors, faculty and peers (honing teamwork and communication skills). Finally, as students become more aware of social issues and recognize that their own actions can make a difference, it is likely that their leadership skills will improve (Rama et al., 2000).

A comprehensive, longitudinal study of 22,236 students, culled from a national sample of baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities, explored the effects of service-learning and community service on the cognitive and affective development of participants during their undergraduate years. It was found that service participation had significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures including academic performance, values, self-efficacy, leadership, choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service following college. Moreover, students conveyed a heightened sense of civic responsibility as a result of their service experience (Astin et al., 2000). The findings of two cross-sectional studies mirrored the results of the large-scale exploration; specifically, undergraduate students who participated in service-learning experienced improved academic development and life skill development, a greater sense of civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998), stronger values, and a stronger understanding of social issues (Eyler et al., 1997). Likewise, a qualitative analysis of ten in-depth student interviews supported the premise that service-learning in a management course is effective and beneficial (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006).

Research on the impact of service-learning on students' moral development has been inconsistent. An examination of the relationship among service-learning, moral development, and moral orientation did not reveal

significant findings. However, students reported becoming more compassionate and sensitive, gained a greater appreciation of and ability to solve social problems, and were more motivated to make the world a better place (Bernacke & Jaeger, 2008).

3. The Service-learning Project

Marketing Research is a requirement for Stockton business students earning a bachelor's of science degree with a concentration in marketing. The prerequisites for the four-credit course are Marketing Principles and Quantitative Business Methods, and it is designated as both a quantitative-reasoning and writing-across-the-curriculum course.

The primary challenge faced by the instructor when preparing to teach the course for the first time in 1994 was how to engage students in a rigorous, real-world application of a comprehensive marketing research study during a single semester. Pedagogically, the instructor was convinced that "learning by doing" was requisite for students to gain an understanding of the marketing research process. The instructor's goal was to incorporate all the components of a primary research study (using the survey method) into the course as well as secondary and qualitative research components. It was anticipated that data collection would prove particularly burdensome for students in light of the single semester constraint. Consequently, a decision was made to gather data from the Stockton student body (or portions thereof). Collecting data through online surveys during the last several years has also vastly expedited the process.

The primary objective of the course is to have students apply the fundamental theories and techniques learned in the course via the textbook and lectures to an original marketing research study in a service-learning setting. The topics are generated through a brainstorming session with various campus representatives (i.e., administrators, members of the student senate, etc.). The class fills a void at the college since a formal marketing department does not exist per se. The civic engagement forum piques student interest in a quantitatively-oriented topic that may otherwise bore and frustrate them. The quantitative reasoning components are crystallized through application, making the course more digestible and manageable for students. Consequently, the classroom experience becomes more relevant, interesting, and understandable. Secondary objectives include the opportunity to conduct web-based survey research, gain practice in teamwork, and develop written and oral communication skills.

The project is undertaken in three phases. Phase 1 encompasses the introduction, secondary and exploratory research, as well as development of a conceptual framework and hypotheses. Phase 2 comprises all aspects of methodology including operationalization of variables, questionnaire design, research design, and sample selection. Phase 3 includes data collection, statistical analysis, presentation of findings and conclusions, acknowledgement of study limitations, and recommendations for future research. Each phase is evaluated, graded, and returned so that feedback is ongoing. Students revise and resubmit Phases 1 and 2 with Phase 3 at the end of the semester to complete the final project. The teams are also required to deliver a 20-minute oral report. (Note: a detailed course development model including project design, formation of teams, instructor's role, and evaluation and grading is elucidated in Barr, 2008a.)

The last week of the semester, the student teams reflect on the project experience. Overall, they have reported positive experiences associated with their service-learning tasks in the research course. Students conveyed that the projects were both challenging and rewarding. They take pride in improving the quality of campus life for future

Stockton students, and are eager to share their ideas about potential topics for future Marketing Research classes. Students have also communicated the value of building their portfolio in such a competitive job market. Many have used the research project as a platform for securing an interview. Other students have applied the transferable skills they learned in the course to an internship setting. The only areas of concern expressed by students about the course have centered on group dynamics, group diversity, and the ability to manage the workload.

Written comments on the instructor's student evaluations have generally indicated that students liked the format (the detailed syllabus and project outline helped them stay on task); valued the release time from class; felt the project was demanding and extensive but valuable; thought their knowledge was broadened in the subject area; and, believed the team project was essential for preparing them for a job in the field.

The primary benefits realized by the members of the Stockton community are the ability to gain ideas and assistance on various projects. As noted at the beginning of the paper, the findings and recommendations of the student teams are used by the college to formulate action plans to secure funding for new initiatives and improve upon existing facilities/services.

4. Methodology

As noted earlier, Petkus (2000) recommended that future service-learning research focus on empirical studies tailored to marketing courses. Hagenbuch (2006) established a paradigm for examining the use of service-learning in a personal selling course. The inputs and outcomes of a sales project provided the foundation for the study. Qualitative and quantitative analyses supported the notion that the class project is beneficial to both the students and the non-profit partners. Recently, Mottner (2010) found that a service-learning project was perceived by students as being the optimal pedagogical tool (compared to case studies, lectures, etc.) in terms of increasing students' knowledge and understanding in a nonprofit marketing course.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of the service-learning experience on the desired intellectual and personal outcomes for students including problem solving, critical thinking, propensity to volunteer, and sense of social responsibility. (The framework for this study was delineated in a prior conceptual paper (Barr, 2010).)

A convenience sample of 64 undergraduate juniors and seniors were queried using a basic pretest-posttest methodology during the Spring and Fall 2010 semesters. Several hypotheses were tested as detailed in the following section.

The first day of the course, students completed a survey. The treatment occurred throughout each respective semester through the service-learning research project. On the last day of the course, students completed the same survey. The survey instrument was developed from a compilation of scales used to study students in service-learning classes (Bringle et al., 2004). The reliability and validity of the scales were tested in prior studies. Further, the survey was comprised of multiple-item, interval scales as well as nominal scales to capture demographic information.

The data was analyzed using paired-observation t-tests, given the anticipated sample size of about 30 each semester. Student responses were compared between the first survey administration and the second. The pairing of observations is a more sensitive experimental design than a standard t-test, so it will convey more information (Aczel & Sounderpandian, 2005).

5. Findings

The hypotheses were tested to determine changes in student attitudes and specific behaviors. Of the 64 surveys collected seven were not considered due to incomplete information. For each question a seven-point Likert scale was utilized with a "1" representing strongly disagree and a "7" representing strongly agree.

H_1: The service-learning project will have a significant positive impact on student commitment to serving their community and making a positive difference.

Students were specifically asked about their intended involvement in community service. The pre-test indicated that the mean was 4.78 and the post-test mean was 5.28. This difference was significant (p < .03). Although the pre-test indicated that students generally agreed with the statement that they do intend to become involved in their community, the service-learning experience significantly increased their intended commitment. Students were then asked about their commitment to making a positive difference in the community. The pre-test mean was 5.44 while the post-test mean was 5.72. This difference was significant (p < .02). The conclusion reached was that although this generation of young people tends to generally be committed to serving their community and making a positive difference, the service-learning experience in the Marketing Research course significantly increased their intentions.

H_2: The service-learning project will enhance student intentions regarding their desire to help others who are in a difficult situation.

Students were asked if they plan to help others in the community who are in difficult situations. The effect of the service-learning experience was very significant in this area. The pre-test mean was 5.37 while the post-test mean was 5.92 (p < .01). It is again noted that this generation of students generally intends to help people in the community who may be in difficult situations. The service learning experience did, however, significantly increase their desire to help.

Students were then asked about their views concerning other members of the community's desire to help those in difficulty. The results were only marginally significant. Students were asked whether they thought other members of the community ought to help others. The pre-test mean was 4.46 while the post-test mean was 4.78. The difference was marginally significant (p < .10). A similar result was found when students were asked whether they thought adults in the community should give some of their time for the good of the community. The pre-test mean was 4.55 while the post-test mean was 4.89. Again this was marginally significant (p < .10). The conclusion is that the service-learning experience did significantly increase the student's intention to help others, but the experience had only a marginal effect on the student's view of the responsibility of others in the community toward those in need.

H_3: The service-learning project will have a positive significant impact on student intentions concerning their involvement in programs to generally solve social problems and to specifically clean up the environment.

Students were asked about the responsibility that they have to help solve social problems. The results indicated that this generation of students tends to feel that they do have a social responsibility to give back. The service-learning experience did, however, add significantly to this belief. The pre-test mean was 5.62 while the post-test mean was 6.11 (p < .02). This indicated that the service-learning experience tended to significantly increase the student's view of social responsibility.

Cleaning the environment seems to be a social problem that is of great concern to many members of the community, especially today's youth. Students were asked if they plan to become involved with programs to help

clean the environment. The pre-test mean was 5.16 while the post-test mean was 5.41. This difference was significant (p < .05). The findings for these questions indicated that students generally have an intention to help solve social problems and are specifically concerned with the environment. The service-leaning experience did significantly increase their intentions in both areas.

H_4: The service-learning project will have a positive significant impact on student outcomes related to their perceived ability to successfully resolve conflicts with others and thinking logically when solving problems.

It was hypothesized that the service-learning experience would increase the perception students had regarding their ability to resolve conflict. The authors believed this because in many of the service-learning situations students were confronted with problems for which they had little or no preparation. When asked about their perceived ability to resolve conflicts, the pre-test mean was 5.22 and the post-test mean was 5.88. This was a significant difference (p < .01). The follow-up question produced similar results. Students were asked about their perceived ability to think analytically when solving problems. The pre-test mean was 4.67 while the post-test mean was 5.34. This difference was very significant (p = 0), and likely due to the nature of the problems encountered by the students during the service-learning experience. In addition, students were enrolled in the Marketing Research course, so it would be expected that upon completing a course that emphasizes critical thinking, students would perceive themselves to be more logical when solving problems.

H_5: The service-learning project will have a positive impact on student's belief that they can make a difference in the world.

In this area, the service-learning experience had perhaps the most significant impact. Prior to the experience students were asked if they thought that their actions could make a difference in the world. The pre-test mean was 5.30. After the service-learning experience the post-test mean was 6.02. This difference was very significant (p = 0). The service-learning experience apparently allowed students to become more confident that their actions could make a difference. This is likely due to the positive results the students realized from their efforts during the service-learning experience.

6. Conclusion

The pedagogical model used to deliver the Marketing Research course within a service-learning context has proven mutually beneficial. Students learn about the marketing research process through direct experience, and gain a greater appreciation for civic engagement. They also have the opportunity to collaborate with other team members, learn about the challenges associated with undertaking primary research, and generate a quality report for their portfolio. Members of the college community use the findings to improve existing services, secure funding for new initiatives, and, ultimately, enhance the quality of student life at the college.

The anecdotal evidence and feedback on student evaluations about the service-learning component in Marketing Research have been reinforced empirically in this study. It was found that there was a significant increase in students' intention to volunteer and to become involved with their community. Moreover, significant increases in social responsibility, intent to help others in need and their confidence level with problem solving and conflict resolution were also found. And one of the most significant findings was that students believed they could make a difference in the world following the service-learning experience.

Recommendations for future research include empirical analyses of the impact of experiential learning on student engagement as well as the benefits that accrue to students in other advanced-level marketing courses.

Another area that warrants investigation is the perceived value of the service-learning experience and resultant outcomes from the perspective of the members of the Stockton community who assist the research teams.

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