Service learning as a philanthropy effort of a student organization

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Introduction

Industrial Distribution (ID) is the process of providing products, parts, related services and solutions to industrial users either for Maintenance, repair and operations (MRO) of their production facilities, or to be used in the manufacture of equipment, machinery, goods and products (OEM , Original equipment manufacturer). Due to the nature of the disciple, students need both technical skills and business acumen to be successful in this field. They can be contributing to the operations aspect or to the sales process. The Industrial Distribution program at Texas A&M University has about 500 students and about 20% of these students are female. Many of them do not think technical sales is a possible career choice for a woman. Many of them also shy away from the many other opportunities that an ID major can pursue thinking that technical sales is the only option for them. In most Engineering schools, there is an active Society of Women in Engineering (SWE) chapter in existence and it is true in this case as well. However, the activities that SWE hosts are mainly catered to students wanting to purpose engineering jobs in design, manufacturing, construction etc. The SWE activities (which includes an active mentoring program and high school students outreach) were not focused on the needs of ID students, especially female ID students. The Society of Women in Industrial Distribution (SWID) was founded in February 2013. SWID caters to the women in Industrial Distribution (ID).

Technical sales is a common career choice for students graduating from ID. Though the graduates are well sought out by the industry, the professional sales career is not a typical choice for a female student. The networking, travel, pay structure are very unique to a sales career and at the outset, sound very daunting to many female students. There are also not many successful female sales managers for them to see in industrial sales. Industrial sales still appears to be done through already existing traditional networks. The female students in engineering are used to thinking and making decisions based on data and analytics. Industrial sales is based mostly on strategic relationships.

When the female students do not have role models to learn from how to do this successfully, they get concerned and less confident about their skills to be successful in this field. The female students worry that their travel will affect their life when they have a family. They want to be close to their family. They also naturally and by professional, being an engineer, are motivated to make decisions and take actions based on numbers and facts. They are not very comfortable when said that their next paycheck is going to be based on the relationships that they develop with potential customers. Hence the students choose to have careers in operations management, supply chain management or consulting. They are successful in those fields; however, if the technical sales was an open choice, it increases the potential opportunities for the students. And if the students are successful in sales, they mostly will get better compensation that any of the other options they are choosing currently. Hence, the female students in ID need support and education on how they can balance work and life, interact with successful practitioners and develop confidence in making successful careers. SWID has an active mentoring program. Through the mentoring program, undergraduate students are paired with current

and former executive Masters students and they receive one-on-one coaching.

The members of SWID then wanted to develop a philanthropy activity for the organization. According to the 2010 National Nonprofit Employment Trends Survey, a survey of over 500 nonprofits from around the country by Washington, DC-based Nonprofit HR Solutions and the Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research, the vast majority of nonprofit positions are dominated by women [Forbes, 2010]. Women are generally interested with helping non-profits and to be a part of efforts that make change. So, when the officers were brainstorming different initiatives that they potentially start, then came up with an idea to do free consulting projects for local non-profit, government and other community agencies.

There are currently two projects in progress where there are groups of 3 SWID members working on each projects. Projects started in October 2014 and will be ending by May 2015. The faculty advisor oversees the students working on the projects and acts as a liaison between the students and the partner agency.

Service-learning or Community Engagement?

The students do not do the project for course credit. This activity is not done as a part of the course. The students are doing this as members of a student organization. Sometimes, it has been said that the SWID students getting involved in the community projects might be just community engagement and not service learning. That is not the case. The students involved in these projects are benefitting from all the four stages of learning defined by Kolb (1984).
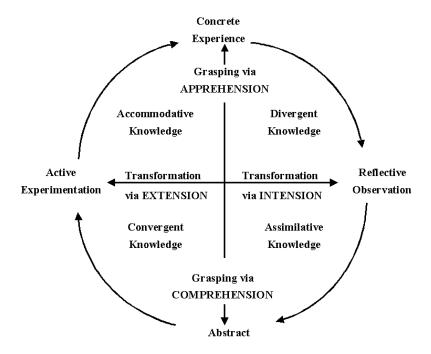

Figure 1: Kolb's model of experiential learning

1. Concrete Experience: The students are going on field trips, organizing meetings with the project stakeholders, and presenting updates to members of the team at the sponsor. They will be making presentation with their results to the governmental agency and even to the public that will be affected by the results of the project. They are very actively involved in the experience.
2. Reflective Observation: The student groups meet with the faculty advisor every other week to provide an update on what they have done so far. One of the topics during discussion is what topics that they learnt in class used and how that is impacting the social issue.
3. Abstract Conceptualization: The students are collecting data from the agency and also making templates to get already existing data. They are using this data to apply models that they have learnt in various classes. Coming up the right data to use in itself is a great learning experience.
4. Active Experimentation: The students are able to put two different methodologies together to come up with a solution to the problem on hand.

As we can see from how learning takes place in this initiative, there is a great balance between learning and service in this activity (Figure 2). The focus of working on the project definitely is on service learning.
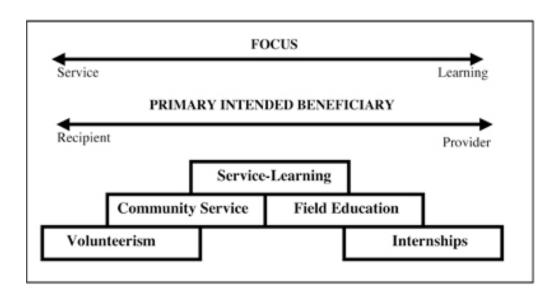

Figure 2: What is Service Learning (Furco 2000)

The three dimensions of service learning are

1. Curricular Content
2. Service
3. Social Issue

This project experience serves as a capstone project for the students. Students are able to apply their curricular content and develop practical knowledge. For example, one of the projects involves developing a sound maintenance plan for the wastewater plant. The

group of students were focused on the cost perspective and asking questions to the agency from that perspective. One of the agency representatives said that it is worse when people's water gets backing up or untreated water ends up in natural water resources and the city gets negative publicity because of that. That was an eye opening experience for the students when they found out how important some factors are even they cannot be quantified monetarily. An instance such as this helped with the students learning about all three - the application of the curricular content, the service aspect and the social issue that is being addressed here. These activities go in sync with the definition of Service learning. "Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996).

Principle of Good Practice for Service Learning

The following 10 principles show what are recommended attributes for a service learning course. Though there is no academic credit involved, there is no reduction in rigor. One of the few things that the university is in discussion with is to create a zero credit course such that students can get this listed on their transcript. Engaging students on projects such as these is considered a high impact learning activity that contributes to the quality enhancement plan of the college.

1. Academic credit is for learning, not service
2. Do not compromise academic rigor
3. Establish learning objectives
4. Establish criteria for the selection of service placements
5. Provide educationally sound learning strategies to harvest community learning to realize course learning objectives
6. Prepare students for learning from the community
7. Minimize the distinction between the students' community learning role and classroom learning role
8. Rethink the faculty instructional role
9. Be prepared for variation in, and some loss of control with student learning outcomes
10. Maximize the community responsibility orientation of the course

Reflection

A method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of the community and that is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students; and provides structured time for the students to reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995) The students do a verbal reflection once every 2 weeks. The plan is to provide the following questions towards the end of the project. This will help us have a record of what students have learning.

There are currently about 15 active members in SWID and 5 of them are working on the

community project. When they were asked about their project experience and provided the following prompts, they provided these answers.

1. *Describe the experience*

Creating this project for the City of Bryan, has helped developed a skill set that I can use in my future career. The project started with meeting with the City of Bryan team and learning the differences we could make on projects. This is a very rewarding experience to be able to come in with an outside look on a problem and give recommendations that can be made to the current process. Not only is it helping out the city that we are living and attending school, we are also learning skills on project management.

2. *What did I learn?*

I have learned how to start with an issue and build the project from the ground up. There were not any instructions for step-by-step as a team we had to figure out everything that needed to be accomplished to get the best results. I have also learnt how to interact and plan meetings with Industry. This has helped to get a perspective on working for city.

3. *How has this experience*
   a. *Increased my curiosity or awareness about the new content of issues*

This has increased my awareness on everything behind the scenes in making a city function as a whole with our tax dollars. You do not really think about what happens with you flush the toilet and where it goes, until you get to see the facility and the process it goes through to be cleaned and put back into a river or lake.

   b. *Aroused me to seek more knowledge outside of the classroom*

This has helped me to realize the importance of helping to better the community with skills I have developed in the classroom. This project has helped me look at my surroundings are the community as a whole. It is the little differences you can make that make a big impact.

   c. *Empowered me to take responsibility for my own decisions and actions;*

The project has helped me to go out of my comfort zone to reach out and help the community.

   d. *Enabled me to apply or transfer my learning to a new setting or circumstance; and*

I have taken skills that I have learned while at the Texas A&M Industrial Distribution program to not just think about myself, but others in the same community that I have been with for four years.

   e. *Helped me connect perspectives gained form other experiences. Including courses, internships, co-ops, jobs, projects, study abroad etc.*

The experiences I have encountered have helped me in other aspects of my life including the internships, projects in classes, and a study abroad trip to China I have been apart of. All the experiences from being apart of Texas A&M have linked back together to further my knowledge and skills to be able to perform anything that comes my way in working world after college.

The above response from the students shows how they are going beyond their comfort zone to learn the practical applications of the skills that they learn in school. In additional to the wealth of experience that they are accumulating, the students also receive a "golden heart award" from staying committed to the project and completing it. The award included a plaque designed by an artist for SWID and a $1000 scholarship.

Figure 3: Golden Heart Award

Benefits of community projects

Learners of all ages are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning and when they can use that information to do something that has an impact on others – especially their local community." This is an exceptional opportunity for experiential learning for the students. The projects are focused on business process improvement and optimization. SWID members work in small groups under the supervision of the faculty advisor. This initiative engages the female students better with their field of study. This also inculcates the idea of giving back to the local community while they are already in school.

This learning experience is more fulfilling and rewarding to the students, as they are able to see how their help has the potential to affect en entire community. This strengthens their self- confidence.

This also teaches the valuable lesson to students that "it is not about the money" and "you don't have to always have money to make an impact". Students, after going through this experience, will get to know first- hand how to work in teams and how to work with government agencies. They also become champions of "giving".

It is often difficult for non-profit organizations to get consultants to look at small projects. Even if they have the need, getting funds to back up such initiatives becomes very challenging. Having these student and faculty teams work on areas for improvement solves this issue. The students bring in a fresh perspective to the problems, which leads to coming up with creative solutions. If the solution provided requires investment, then the city will have a sound argument backed up hard facts and return-on-investment numbers to take to potential donors.

The students, in many instances, provide cheap or free labor. That does not mean that the quality of the work is compromised. Only committed students volunteer to work on these projects and the faculty closely supervises their work.

Conclusion

Being engaged in student organizations provide significant leadership, problem solving, and communication skills that are transferred to the workforce. SWID allows students the opportunity to hone those professional soft skills and creates a forum that opens and encourages dialogue between students and industry. Some of the soft skills that students develop during their project discussions are asking the right questions, asking leading questions, interacting with "different" people – people with various skill levels, skills sets, objectives, backgrounds, needs etc., learning to understand what is not explicitly said, negotiating, change management, learning the right way to get the answers about the issue, how to approach people and get them to answer questions etc. The development of soft skills has been a huge learning experience for the students. Having access to varying perspectives and mentors allows members to build a stronger network that will serve as great resources and sounding boards throughout their career. SWID's newest consulting initiative for non-profits/ service learning excellently merges occupational skills and service to the community. Participants are fully engaged in projects that utilize lessons from the classroom to create a lasting impact in the community.

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