

Developing a Service Learning Project to Enhance Business Students' Mentoring Skills

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Abstract

The Foundation for Excellent Schools supports a nationwide project, the Century Program, to link 100 rural and inner city schools middle schools with 100 colleges and universities. The TDP goal is to increase college going awareness among middle school students from families where going to college is not a family or community tradition. This paper will describe how The Century Program was implemented in one partnership and the service learning opportunity offered to 100 first year business students. Students experienced learning how to mentor and the value of being a mentor and students increased their critical thinking and writing skills.

Keywords: Mentoring, service learning, experiential learning, college awareness



Introduction

Service learning, a concrete effort to link theory and practice to enhance student learning, is today a widespread and growing pedagogy in higher education. Numerous scholars have advocated this approach with Ernest L. Boyer's 1990 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered* having a very significant impact on advocating for the "scholarship of engagement" [Boyer 1990]. This paper will examine a service learning initiative in a one credit first year seminar in business course at Ithaca College.

What makes this examination interesting is that most service learning projects involving business education that are described in the literature seem to occur in upper level business courses. Few business schools offer many first year courses. Most business courses being offered at the junior and senior level, especially at business schools accredited by AACSB (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business).

One question an instructor needs to ask in contemplating developing a service learning project in any course is whether a service learning project can be successful if students have limited academic training relevant to the service learning project. This is especially true when contemplating a service learning project for first semester freshman students. A number of researchers have reached the conclusion that the answer is yes if the service learning project is well designed and appropriate for the course and student's experience [Klink and Athaide, 2004 and McGoldrick et al 2000].

A service learning project to be more than community service, albeit worthwhile in and of itself, must pass pedagogical muster. Susan R Madsen, writing in the *Journal of Education for Business* offers a useful definition of service learning that can be used to evaluate whether a community service experience offers a genuine learning opportunity. Professor Madsen defines service learning as follows:

"Academic service learning: a multidimensional pedagogy (a form of experiential learning) that is integrated within a credit-bearing course in the form of an organized, thoughtful, and meaningful project. Students are paired with agencies or organizations that have specific needs related to the content of a particular course. Students then perform the needed community service while, at the same time, using course content and reflecting on their experiences for enhanced learning."
[Madsen 2004]

Madsen's definition builds upon the work of David Kolb. Kolb created a hypothetical construct for defining how service learning can enhance student learning more than twenty years ago and his work has been widely cited since then. Kolb's model consists of four stages: (1) concrete experience (2) reflective observation (3) abstract conceptualization and (4) active experimentation [Kolb 1981, 1984].

The service learning project in the first year seminar class as described below was designed to follow Kolb's approach. Students were offered a concrete mentoring experience, asked to apply what they learned from their reading and classroom discussion about mentoring, and to reflect upon and evaluate the service learning project. Each student had limited flexibility to actively experiment as Kolb would recommend, and the students were challenged to propose changes in the service learning project based on their experiences.

TCP and the Mentoring Project

The Foundation for Excellent Schools (since renamed CFES, College for Every Student, <http://www.fesnet.org/>) is led by Dr. Rick Dalton. The foundation supports a nationwide project to link 100 middle schools with 100 colleges and universities. The objective of the project, known as The Century Program (TCP), is to increase college going awareness among middle school students from families where going to college is not part of the family or community tradition.

The Century Program seeks to boost student achievement not by traditional efforts such as focusing on more tutoring or bringing more money into high schools, but by raising aspirations among young students by exposing them to experiences that inspire them. The Century Program attempts to tackle low high school graduation and college matriculation rates among students from rural and inner city schools from a psychological, not academic, standpoint.

According to the Foundation for Excellent Schools students from inner city and rural schools can be encouraged to increase their academic performance in high school and to move on to college by engaging in high-impact activities that incorporate four core practices [The Century Program].

1. Mentoring: All TCP Scholars have a mentor, either a college student, older high school student, and/or community member.
2. Early College Awareness: Colleges offer activities for TCP Scholars and their parents/ caregivers to help them understand how to access and succeed in college.
3. Goal Setting: College students help TCP Scholars to identify short- and long-term, as well as “dream,” goals.
4. Community Service: All TCP Scholars participate in service activities that enable them to give back to their schools and communities.

The Century Program partnered Ithaca College, a comprehensive college of 6,000 students in upstate NY, and a nearby rural school. 100 first semester college students enrolled in a first year seminar in business class were connected to 100 middle school students enrolled in the Spencer-Van Etten middle school. Spencer-Van Etten is a school district located in a rural area with approximately 50% of its students eligible for the federal free lunch program due to the low income status of those families.

The college students were enrolled in a first year business seminar class designed to educate students about personal growth issues that are important to both business managers and college students such as goal setting, time management, stress management, career planning, and mentoring. The TCP project was established as a service learning project for business students to apply what they had learned about mentoring. The mentoring project consisted of four parts.

1. Students were required to read a detailed description and analysis of mentoring prepared by the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation [VSAC Mentoring Manual]. The purpose of the reading was to provide the “abstract conceptualization” about mentoring that would inform the student experience in working with the Spencer-Van Etten Middle School students.
2. Each college student was assigned a middle school student as a mentee. The college students received detailed instructions to email their mentees to develop

- an email mentoring relationship.
3. College students and middle school mentees were all invited to attend a college football game, a college play, and the college students were invited to attend a Parents' Night meeting in the Spencer-Van Etten Middle School to explain the TCP project to parents. At the latter event a student panel shared with parents personal stories about their first semester going to college experience to help demystify the college experience. In addition, college students were invited to join their mentees for lunch in the middle school and to share in a community service activity (bell ringing for donations for the Salvation Army).
 4. Each college student was required at the end of the semester to write a detailed memo reflecting on their experience and to provide an informed evaluation of the mentoring program between Ithaca College and the Spencer-Van Etten middle school. Before beginning their memos students were required to review the TCP website (www.fesnet.org/tcpdescription.cfm) to determine whether the mentoring project met the goals and objectives of the TCP program. Students were asked to offer suggestions for improvement, to identify what has been done well and what should be continued. Students were asked to explain their recommendations and were informed that some of their memos would be forwarded for review by the Foundation for Excellent Schools.

PROGRESS TO DATE

The Century Program is a three year program designed to increase academic performance by students in rural and inner city schools where going to college is not part of the family or community tradition. This paper describes the beginning of one program between Ithaca College and the Spencer-Van Etten School district. The initial effort of trying to coordinate 100 college freshman and 100 middle school students was quite daunting. The school district required that all emails from college students be sent directly to the school and read by a teacher or other school official before being passed on to the middle school students to protect the students from any inappropriate subject matter. The school has a very strict email policy designed to protect students from harm and the school from objections raised by parents.

Middle school students were not always prompt and eager in their responses and often their emails back to the college students were quite brief. Many of the middle school students are neither good writers nor comfortable in front of a keyboard despite their clear interest in having a college mentor or "buddy." It was difficult in the first semester of the project to develop a close email mentoring relationship. However, many of the middle school students were quite excited to have been chosen as TCP scholars and to have the privilege of being connected in this way with a college student. The events held on campus, the football game and the play, were well attended by the middle school students and reasonably well attended by the college students. In many cases, however, mentees showed up and the mentors could not attend or vice versa. This was a minor issue resolved by reassigning college students to different middle school students for the day.

While it is too early to determine whether the project is having any impact on the middle school students in a measurable way as to their academic performance, attendance at school, or future attendance at college, anecdotally the results are in the right direction. A number of the students are asking the college students about their

major, what they do at college, and several now say they want to go to college.

The impact of the service learning project on the college students has been a mixed one. In preliminary qualitative assessments students recognize mentoring as an important managerial function and that having a mentor is also acknowledged as being important for more rapid advancement. Many of the college students are focused on the initial logistical difficulties of the service learning experience such as the time commitment required, difficulties with emailing middle school students, and not being sure that their efforts are making a difference. But many acknowledge that mentoring is something you have to work at. It is a skill that can be improved. Requiring college students to prepare a final memo for the project enhances their writing skills and makes them reflect upon their service learning experience.

Future Directions

The mentoring project between Ithaca College and the Spencer-Van Etten School district is a three year service learning project. Like many service learning experiences there have been a number of logistical problems that will be improved upon with experience. True, meaningful assessment of the experience is difficult and needs to be improved. Overall student perceptions are positive with some students finding the experience very meaningful, but it is difficult to truly measure the actual learning taking place. Improvements in assessment are needed. In addition, one interesting dimension to explore is to open the experience to non-business students to determine whether the experience is viewed differently by business majors vs. non-business majors.

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The Century Program: Foundation for Excellent Schools
<http://www.fesnet.org/tcpdescription.cfm>

Vermont Student Assistance Corporation Mentoring Manual

[http://services.vsac.org/ilwwcm/resources/file/eb007d492184d2/mentoring_manual.pdf]

