

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002
**IMPLEMENTING SERVICE LEARNING FOR ACCOUNTANTS:
THE NOT FOR PROFIT PROJECT**

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning for accountants most often appears in the tax area, as students take part in the VITA program (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance). The Not For Profit Project described in an ABSEL 2001 paper (Vik and Doran, Experiential Learning for Accountants: The Not for Profit Project) now places some students in an Accounting Communication class in short-term projects with a local community partner. This demonstration will provide useful handouts about organizing such a hands-on project, finding appropriate community partners, assigning a useful reflection component to students, and evaluating the projects when complete. A nationally compiled resource list on community service learning will be available. Not all accounting communication students go out into the community; some teams still write and research their NFP, its fundraiser, related budget, and persuasive proposal, from a distance. This dichotomy will also be discussed, as most community service-learning projects are class-wide rather than having just some teams in the class included.

**IDENTIFYING STUDENTS FOR THE
PROJECT**

Students should volunteer, as subject matter interest is critical to project success. To get a volunteer team, stress the special opportunity and the fact that only a few are allowed to do it every semester. Students will get exposure to a community group, practice in communication skills, and can use their business skills to benefit a community group. In working with a real fundraiser instead of one a team merely designs, students are exposed to real-life budgeting, financial issues, and internal controls.

Students sign a waiver so that their work can be used in research, but no videotaping is allowed at our university. We have no further liability issues, however, according to the school attorney.

Since we assign our teams at the beginning of the term, it is important to discuss this project early so that a team can have time to decide if it wants to choose it. To improve logistics, it might even work to allow an interested team to choose its own members.

**PREPARING COMMUNITY PARTNERS
FOR THE PROJECT**

Prepare the community partners for what an accounting student can do for them. We want exposure to issues and community needs, so students may end up doing *some* mundane tasks such as packaging food products for a boutique, but we try to get the students into a position where they can handle the money at an event, keep records of expenses, and help the group plan cash flow for an event, rather than just stuffing envelopes or doing routine clerical work. Since most organizations have a treasurer and regular audits by a parent organization or an accountant, students will usually not be doing bookkeeping as much as charts and histories of what happened at the event, including balance sheets and cash flows, or preparing preliminary financial statements after an event.

In one of this term's projects, students compared financial reports for the past three years of an event, giving graphic proof to the organization that while more people attended the event every year, money earned for the cause went down each year because of excessive catering costs. The students also pointed out the importance of budgeting an event before it occurs (organizations are often so enthusiastic about the project and the cause that they miss this step). An interesting result of this project was that the students assume they will work on it again next year to help keep it on track.

The second student project illustrated one important point about interacting with the community partners: they often know little about actual accounting. The project was described to me as developing an accounting system for a project involving thousands of toy and food donations during six weeks before Christmas in a large urban area. When the students learned more about it at a meeting with the organization, they returned and described it to me as developing a spreadsheet, a much simpler task. It was useful for the students to find out how much their work is valued and how difficult it appears to an outsider, and invaluable to the organization to have extra trained volunteers helping organize their records so that next year they can get donations more efficiently (omit areas that do not donate, have extra drivers in area with many donations, etc.)

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FOCUSING STUDENT ACTION

Students can do some analytical evaluation of their community organization, the population served (both numbers and diversity), and the accounting of the organization (budget, event budget, financial statement, annual report, internal controls). They also find out about the organization's needs, what other organizations compete with a similar cause or similar events, and how community calendars can be kept so that events are not competing for times and dates. Organizational needs vary, but smaller organizations especially need help with cash flow and event planning through a budget. Smaller organizations most often need extra pairs of hands to help at events. Even larger organizations with national office oversight need help keeping track of cash flow and in planning volunteer work most efficiently. At one of our large organization events, the appearance of too many volunteers was a problem.

A student team that comes into an organization for just a few weeks will not know much about the context of the project and the community partner, so the instructor needs to prepare the students for the project also. The ideal is to have the instructor also participate in the project as I did this term, but in the long run my participation will become too time-consuming.

The timing of the project is very important. This term, one project for the San Diego Hall of Champions Sports Museum Auxiliary took place in the 11th week of the semester and was easily concluded in time for the final presentation in the 15th week. Students met with the Auxiliary several times in the two weeks before the event, worked setting up the event and then at the event itself, and wrote drafts of their reports afterwards before preparing their presentation. The other project, for the Salvation Army Women's Auxiliary Toy and Joy Shop, took place the 14th week and it was a scramble to complete enough of a report for the presentation (it was revised and expanded by the final exam the next week, and the students are in fact working on the spreadsheet they developed for a few more weeks after the term ends).

ADDING VALUE TO THE PROJECT

One special advantage of this kind of experiential education is the effect on personal values: students have an increased awareness of the community they live in and its volunteer needs and of their own personal efficacy (a fancy way of saying they realize that they can make a difference in the problems that face their communities and possibly even the world as a whole). It also leads to more engagement in the classroom experience because they have stories to tell students who remained in the classroom about their project and their community partner. Students who are already doing some volunteer work, even with student organizations, learn practical ideas for running fund raisers, obtaining auction items, and preparing for a well-run event.

The student reflections required as an individual assignment are often remarkable in the way students talk about what they learned and how it has changed their perspective on life. One student talked about learning about intrinsic and extrinsic values and changing his goals to focus more on what he could give rather than what he could get, for example.

REFLECTING ON THE PROJECT

The literature on community service learning projects emphasizes the importance of reflection. Students can keep factual records about their experience (see Journal Cover Sheet), but requiring formal reflections about their experience is key to making the project really work for students. Here is an example of leading students from fact to analysis in their project (some questions adapted from Lenk, 2001, p. 20):

Descriptive Question (for the weekly journal)

Briefly describe what you did during the past week. Who, what, when, where, how, how long it took. How did it relate to what we have been doing in class? Was help available when you needed help? Did you know from whom to get help?

Analytical questions

Constructively describe your service learning partnership experiences. Do not be afraid to mention what you feel were weaknesses in the partnership – try to write about them in a direct, non-accusatory fashion. Then describe what you could have done to prevent or minimize these weaknesses. Discuss strengths: What went well? Why? How much did you have to do with that? What went poorly? Why? How much did you have to do with that?

Another aspect of reflection is looking at the larger view: In what way has your attitude about providing help to the nonprofit organizations as part of your coursework changed? In what ways can you provide value in volunteering your professional services to nonprofit members of the community? In what other ways can you or the firm you go to work for provide service to the nonprofits?

Potential Essay Topic (Lenk, 2001, p. 21)

How do you define your community? Thomas Piper, Harvard Business School, said one of the goals of Harvard's ethics program is to instill "excitement about a career in business and about the opportunities in such a career **to contribute beyond self.**" What meaning does this statement have for you? Has this project, combined with your academic training encouraged or enabled you to reflect on those opportunities? What has this program done, if anything, to educate and support your sense of citizenship? Will your behavior change in the future? In what ways has your outlook on the role of business changed? How likely is it that you will do a similar project again on your own?

CONCLUSION

The course and project handouts explain the project further. The team teaching this Accounting Communication

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course is very pleased with the new aspect of this existing project. It still teaches persuasive writing, budgeting, and analysis of a not for profit, but the CSL project students gain self-knowledge and awareness of community needs that will enable them to become even more successful professionals.

I am refining the project to deal with timing problems (the community partner event needs to be the 12th week of the term or earlier to be most effective), Board of Directors change in assignment (if the other team acting as a Board of Directors does not get the complete report early enough, it is difficult for members to ask thoughtful questions), and obtaining thoughtful community partner analysis based on often limited information.

Attachments (further handouts at the session)

Community Service Learning Project Assignment
Handout

Student Journal Cover Sheet

Regular Not for Profit Assignment Handout

REFERENCES

- Lenk, M. (1999) *Service Learning in Accounting: A Guidebook*. Colorado State University.
- Vik, G. and Doran, M. (2001) "Experiential Learning for Accountants: The Not for Profit Project." Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning Proceedings, Volume 28. ed. K. Pittenger and M. J. Vaughn.

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IDS 390W: NOT-FOR-PROFIT ASSIGNMENTS (CSL)

8-1/GNV

Individual Journal and Reflection Memo

Team Report on Project

Team Presentation

Board Questions (team as “Board of Directors”) due day of presentation

Individual

Your role: Student attending NFP meetings and working on fund-raiser

Audience: Your instructors and the NFP contact person

Task: Keep a journal of your interaction with the NFP (minimum of ten hours outside of the fund-raising event) and write a 1-2 page memo reflection about your project. Consider the following issues (but DO NOT just write a list of answers!!): What population does the organization serve? How many people are helped annually? How does the organization know it is getting results? Does it matter? Are there cash flow issues? (Budget, Financial Statement, Annual Report?) Internal control issues? Did you learn about yourself, diversity, San Diego’s needs, differences in people’s lives? Are volunteers making a difference in this organization? How? What problems seem to be facing the organization, if any?

Team

Your role: Team of students who worked with a local NFP during the semester

Audience: IDS 390W class, in which each team has worked on an NFP project designing a fund-raiser and writing a proposal for funding

Task: Write a report (3-5 pages with attachments if applicable) describing your team’s interaction with the NFP, the fund-raiser you worked on, and your results. Consider the issues listed in the reflection section as well as a typical SWOT analysis (some brainstorming issues for one organization are started below):

<p>Strengths Meet mission/community needs Supplement government funding for cause Refer needs to other groups Exec. Director</p>	<p>Weaknesses Accounting records Carry-over from past years Changing board Auxiliary to parent organization</p>
<p>Threats Competitive organizations for same \$ Same population Similar events Crowded social event schedule</p>	<p>Opportunities New need, unmet need Partnerships with corporations New volunteers Younger (time> money) Join similar groups (economies of scale) New projects from other cities (sharing of ideas)</p>

Present this report orally (10-12 minutes) using PowerPoint during the NFP presentations.

Board Questions (Team as “Board of Directors”)

Your Role: Board of Directors of a corporation being solicited for money.

Audience: Members of a not-for-profit organization

Task: Using a copy of another team’s report, prepare a list of questions that will help you decide whether to fund its request. Write a list of questions (use a mix of types: limiting or expanding the information, gathering facts, opinions and values) that follow a logical pattern showing why you are asking these specific questions. Pose these questions at the end of the presentation and turn in a typed copy of your questions.

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IDS 390W JOURNAL COVER SHEET—NFP Project (CSL)

Name _____ Class _____

Date _____

Organization Name _____

Office Address _____

Office Phone _____ Fax _____

Email _____

Contact Person _____

Role/Title _____ Phone _____

Brief Mission Statement _____

Annual Report?

Financial Statement?

Event (type, name, brief description) _____

Date/Time _____ Price _____

Expected attendance _____

Need/money expected _____

Meeting Log (minimum ten hours beyond event duration)

Date	Time in/time out	Person(s) met with

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IDS 390W: NOT-FOR-PROFIT ASSIGNMENTS

11-01/GNV

Assignment Parts

Individual Briefing Report (1-2 pages)

Team Budgeting/Funding Report to Board

Team Presentations

Board Questions (team as “Board of Directors”) due day of presentation

Individual Briefing Report

Your role: Professional Staff Accountant

Audience: Manager in a Public Accounting firm who has been asked to serve on an Advisory Board of a not-for-profit organization, social agency, or public service group.

Task: Select a *local* not-for-profit organization focusing on a societal concern (the arts, literacy, domestic violence, etc.) as your manager’s NFP. Prepare a 1-2 page briefing report in memo form to your manager describing what the agency does, how it is funded, what other financing options are available, what fundraisers it now holds. You may interview someone involved in the organization and use its home page, but check for external source articles to see if red flags exist. GET APPROVAL of your organization from Dr. Vik..

Required: Attachment listing all research sources in appropriate MLA or APA format. CITE SOURCES in text when borrowing through paraphrase OR quote.

Team Draft, Final Report, Presentation

Your Role: Members of a not-for-profit organization

Audience: Board of Directors of a corporation which you are asking for money.

Task: Each team selects one agency or organization for the individual briefing papers by team members. Prepare a team presentation and accompanying documentation that requests funding and demonstrates the value of your cause/project, the benefits to the sponsoring organization, and your overall business expertise.

Scenario: Your organization is requesting funds from a corporation to help underwrite the costs of a community service or fund raising event that will raise awareness to combat a social problem (gangs, health concerns, aging, literacy, family violence, access to the arts, etc.) You need a donor to underwrite the basic costs of organizing and setting up the event. You need to convince the donor of the soundness and value of your proposal. Originality counts (DO NOT copy an existing event).

Required Proposal: Transmittal letter, Executive summary (2 page limit), Pro Forma budget, and assumptions used in preparing the budget.

Presentation: Prepare a 10-12 minute presentation to the Board of Directors of the donor including appropriate visual aids and handouts. Minimum inclusions: necessary budgets, a list of the assumptions used to formulate the budgets.

Board Questions (Team as “Board of Directors”)

Your Role: Board of Directors of a corporation being solicited for money.

Audience: Members of a not-for-profit organization

Task: Using a copy of another team’s report, prepare a list of questions that will help you decide whether to fund its request. Write a list of questions (use a mix of types: limiting or expanding the information, gathering facts, opinions and values) that follow a logical pattern showing why you are asking these specific questions. Pose these questions at the end of the presentation and turn in a typed copy of your questions.

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