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“STUDENTS IN FREE ENTERPRISE” AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how Students in Free Enterprise groups can be used by universities to provide valuable experiential learning in all phases of management, marketing, accounting and economics. It presents a few of the thousands of projects, which actively involve students in their communities to solve problems and create better working environments. While doing so, these students are practicing important skills first presented in their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways for teachers to provide experiential exercises as student's progress through their academic careers. Most of these are developed by a teacher and are associated with a particular course. This proposed discussion describes a longer program which students usually follow in their junior and senior years, but which some continue while in an MBA program. SIFE is a national organization, which sponsors student programs in colleges and universities throughout the country. Students in SIFE chapters conduct a wide variety of learning projects in support of community programs. This discussion presents a brief background of SIFE, then shows how student projects function both as valuable experiential learning and community support programs.

WHAT IS “STUDENTS IN FREE ENTERPRISE”

Students In Free Enterprise is a national, “not-for-profit organization supported by individuals, foundations, and corporations whose mission is to

build collegiate SIFE Teams who teach free enterprise in order to better individuals, communities, and countries.” (SIFE) Composed of more than 30,000 students in over 500 university chapters across the country and around the world, SIFE students gain valuable experience in planning and managing business enterprises, and in teaching others about the free enterprise system. Not just another student group, SIFE is university students involved in teaching and practicing free enterprise. (SIFE)

SIFE AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

SIFE has a learning philosophy, which seems to exemplify the goal of experiential learning: “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I might remember, involve me and I will understand.” (SIFE) Although most planned experiential learning takes place as a result of classroom projects, many educators and most employers realize that learning takes place throughout students' academic careers. Experiential learning is so important because educators know that it is very difficult to “teach” many concepts and most skills in a classroom. McKnight (1995, p. 192) has said that “skills can be learned only from experience,” while Payette (1993, p. 440) restated the paradox that most management teachers have long felt: “management is learned mainly from experience, but it is impossible to teach experience.”

SIFE students in hundreds of colleges and universities are involved with thousands of projects, which support their communities. A few of the many award-winning projects include:

1. Working on a project with the university's school of nursing to take clinical students out into the community. The nurse practitioner program wants to have nursing students do free health screenings and health education programs, but no one knows how to set this up. SIFE students are involved in setting up the non-profit organization, checking with state agencies regarding licensure, and helping to determine liability coverage issues.
2. Working with local banks in helping secondary students set up and learn about checking and savings accounts.
3. Sponsoring an Investment Challenge where high school students are taught to choose stock and invest assets in a competitive atmosphere where high school teams are pitted against other teams in their regions. This project involved local business people in providing the funding and speaking to classes.
4. Creating a Free Enterprise Foundation, raising \$15,000, and then using the money as mini-grants to support teachers in secondary schools in developing projects, which usually cannot be funded through the normal channels.
5. Developing a project to create greater public awareness of free enterprise concepts through media (print and television) advertising and programs.
6. Working with local agencies in helping adults in the 25-40-age range understand retirement planning.
7. Conducting a Community Career Fair where local business people set up booths and talked with high school students about the skills needed to get and keep a job.

CONCLUSION

"SIFE is an active learning program. By getting students involved in SIFE projects, it reinforces their instruction in economics, management, marketing, education and communication" (SIFE) This discussion demonstrates the value of reinforcing classroom learning with a strong, on-going program of experiential learning such as conducted by SIFE chapters. "People support what they help to create" is the cornerstone of SIFE leadership training. (SIFE)

REFERENCES

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