Service Learning in Hospitality Education: Putting Traction on Action

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Abstract

This paper describes the foundation and support for exposing hospitality students to service learning as part of their undergraduate education. Results of an exploratory research project and the activities of two faculty members to implement a service learning component in an Introduction to Hospitality course located in a Baccalaureate program that requires students to complete 100 hours of community service before graduation are presented. Strategies for hospitality educators to help students become engaged in service learning activities after making service learning a requirement for graduation are also described.

Key Words: service learning, experiential education, e-portfolio, hospitality education

Introduction

In 1996, Jacoby stated that service learning can be defined as community service, volunteerism, altruism, and citizenship for the good of a community. Effective service learning includes managing and coordinating projects and activities through teamwork, which requires students to witness life through a different lens, and experience diversity firsthand. Although the concept of service learning has been in existence for more than thirty years, the proponents of implementing service learning into the undergraduate curricula have gained attention only recently. Supporters for including service learning in undergraduate education present evidence of positive educational outcomes for students. These include increasing students' abilities to work well with others, improving leadership and communication skills, and enhancing tolerance toward others (Astin & Sax, 1998; McKinney, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Bittle, Duggleby, & Ellison, 2002; Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, Kerrigan, Spring, Grosvold, & Longley, 1997). All of these outcomes are relevant to the education of hospitality students where the goal of instruction is to foster interpersonal, analytical, social and managerial skills required by the industry. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the experience of a pair of hospitality educators who explored strategies to get their students involved in service learning activities.

Background

While service learning has been used in schools and colleges for more than 30 years, the term service learning has been defined and redefined over time. Two succinct and comprehensive definitions of service learning are written by Jacoby (1996) and the National Service Learning Center, are presented as follows:

"Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning" (p. 5).

and

"Service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity will change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining community-service tasks with structured instructional opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content" (National Service Learning Center, 2004)

Enthusiasm for service learning programs in higher education is a response to the wide critique of inadequacies of the US undergraduate education system in 1980s and 1990s. Rice (1996) described the academic community as having turned inward, developing knowledge for purposes other than social benefit, with allegiance to academic societies and political power focused within the academy instead of in the larger society. Boyer (1988, 1990) criticized the social isolation of the University and the absence of curricular relevance to the community.

Eyler et al. (2001) summarized the findings of service learning research in higher education in recent years. In addition to the benefits for universities and colleges in developing closer and significant ties to their local communities, their summary reveals that service learning contributes to the personal and interpersonal development of students. Service learning has a positive effect on "the sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development" (Eyler et al., 2001, p.196). Students in service learning programs show improvement in their abilities to work well with others, in their leadership skills, and in their communication skills. It is reported that involving students in
Service learning programs also foster civic development and enhance a sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills.

Furthermore, adoption of service learning as an experiential education strategy seems to enhance traditional academic learning and career development (Waterman, 1997). Given the diversity of work in the hospitality industry; the range of activities these businesses are involved in; and, the call for greater corporate responsibility to the larger society, all of the positive outcomes presented in the above review of the literature are extremely important to the development of our future leaders in the hospitality industry.

**What is Service learning?**

Service learning is a method through which academic subjects, technical skills, values and citizenship are taught. It involves active learning—drawing lessons from the experience of performing community service work. Though service learning is most often discussed in the context of elementary and secondary or higher education, it is a useful learning strategy as well for programs not based in schools.

There are three basic components to effective service learning. The first is sufficient preparation, which includes setting objectives for skills to be learned or issues to consider, and includes planning projects so they contribute to learning at the same time work gets done. Next is the component of having students carry out service learning activities. The final component requires that participants attempt to analyze their experience and draw lessons through discussion with others and reflection on the work. Reflection about the service creates a greater understanding of the experience and the ways in which volunteer service addresses the needs of the community. Reflection on community service further elaborates their concerns about community needs and their commitment to become involved in helping meet those needs. Direct guidance of the reflection experience helps the students recognize themselves as active citizens.

A note of caution, it is important to understand what ideal service learning is not. Service learning is not an episodic volunteer program or an "add-on" to an existing curriculum. It is not at its best when it merely requires students to log a set number of community service hours in order to fulfill graduation requirements. And finally, it should not be a unilateral benefit for either the student or the community (National Service Learning Center, 2004).

**The Service Learning Experience**

In the Spring of 2004, the authors applied for, and received a modest grant to retool their *Introduction to Hospitality* course to include service learning as part of the course instruction and student grades. The stipulations of the grant were to use the funds to change an existing course to advance one of three of the University's general education goals and to include the use of at least one of three pedagogical strategies. The authors selected the goals of advancing service-based learning and the use of both active learning and technology in development of the new course activities.

The purpose of these changes to the existing course was to accomplish the following three things. Integrate service learning into the curriculum; facilitate the use of technology in teaching and learning; and create opportunities for students to actively engage in service learning utilizing hospitality skills and knowledge. To meet the criteria of the grant, the instructors began to restructure the course by developing an interactive course website, compiling assigned readings and video presentations, generating a network of potential guest speakers to address the topics of poverty and hunger in America, securing service learning work sites, and constructing an e-portfolio template for students to chronic their service learning and hospitality education achievements.

**Course Website**

The instructors created a course homepage that provided students hyperlinks for the Syllabus, Calendar, Course Content, Readings, Hospitality Community Service Forms, Assignments, Reflective Journal, Surveys and Quizzes. The following is a brief description of how each of these tools was utilized in the course.

- **Syllabus**—an interactive document linked students to course content, readings, Internet resources, and online library resources.

- **Calendar**—a customizable calendar was provided to allow students a virtual location to track all course activities, such as class meetings/topics, community service orientation and trips, assessment due dates, and special guest visits.

- **Course Content**—class notes and presentations were available for students to access before and after class.
Readings – in addition to the primary hospitality text, students were assigned specific readings about poverty and hunger in the US.

Hospitality Community Service Organizer – an online organizer page that provided students with links to examples of community service initiatives from hospitality organizations. As students explored and found examples of what hospitality organizations were doing to address poverty and hunger, they were able to add to this resource.

Assigned Short Papers – students were asked to complete several short assignments that were designed to raise their level of awareness of the impact of poverty on our society as well as to learn about and share how hospitality organizations are making an impact in the lives of people faced with the dilemma of poverty and hunger.

Journal – students were asked to keep a journal that detailed their personal thoughts and reflections of their learning about hunger and poverty and the completion of service learning activities.

Service Learning Experiences and Resources

Students were assigned readings from several resources including various Internet sites and books, including “The Working Poor”, “Nickel and Dimed” and “Begging for Change”. Additionally, videos and guest presentations were provided to help students think about hunger and poverty and the ways in which the hospitality industry is helping ameliorate these societal problems. It was believed that these experiences, combined with their activities at the service learning worksites help students to think more critically about the sometimes invisible and always complex problems of poverty and hunger, and encourage them to be active leaders in their communities both now and in the future. Inspirational role models were invited to speak with students about their experiences throughout the semester.

It was through a combination of experiences and guided discovery that we believed students would be able to develop an understanding and empathy and to feel the joy of serving as well as a spirit of optimism that they can make a difference. Moreover, the goal of student activities in community organizations was to help students further develop their hospitality related technical and leadership skills through opportunities to practice them at various community service venues, which included the local Food Bank and local soup kitchens, early learning centers and senior citizens communities.

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios are gaining recognition as a valuable tool for learners, instructors, and academic organizations. Instructional planners are proclaiming that online folders are higher education’s new tool for students to show-and-tell about their work (Cohen and Hibbits, 2004), and as a tool that “may have the most significant effect on education since the introduction of formal schooling” (Love, McKean, and Gathrical, 2004). Laying aside the new-technology hype and enthusiasm, e-portfolios are viewed as a response to fundamental shifts that are occurring in teaching and learning.

Working with an on-campus instructional design consultant, an e-portfolio template was developed that contained six linked HTML pages. At the beginning of the semester students were provided a personal folder housed on the course website to host these pages and their work during the semester. Instruction and tutoring was provided throughout the semester to help students understand how to edit and add content to the web pages as they gained knowledge and expertise in technology.

Methodology

The results reported in this paper were gathered through a pre- and post-course survey administered to students who were registered in an Introduction to Hospitality course at a major university. The majority of students who were enrolled in the course had declared their major to be in Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management.

At the beginning of each term, students were asked and directed to take an online community service survey (Survey I). During the final week of the course students were again asked and directed to complete a second online community service survey (Survey II). Survey I and II contained 24 and 18 questions, respectively. The differences between the two surveys were that in Survey I students were asked if they had participated in community service before attending college, if their parents were active in community service, and three demographically related questions. In Survey II these preceding questions were not repeated, but students were asked to evaluate the value of course and reflection activities in changing their understanding and empathy toward community service activities and the issues of poverty and hunger.
Most of the statements employed a Likert-type scale with "1" being strongly disagree and "5" being strongly agree. Additionally, students were asked to select benefits that they obtained from participating in community service activities both before coming to college and after completing the course. Data were analyzed using paired sample t-test technique, which compared each student's responses between Survey I and Survey II.

Results

The first survey (Survey I) was administered in the first week of classes and attempted to assess their attitudes toward community service prior to starting the course, and to learn the type, time frame, and their general support for participating in these activities. The second survey (Survey II) was administered during the final week of classes. Data were collected from students enrolled in the course for three semesters. Total student enrollment for the three semesters was 243. Collected student data was only analyzed from students who completed both Surveys I and II. A total 179 students completed both surveys and were used in the current report, for a response rate of 73.7 percent.

Almost 94 percent (93.8%) of the students reported to have volunteered prior to coming to college. Of the respondents, 115 (64.6%) were female and 64 (34.4%) were male. Since this was an introductory course and most students had already selected this program as their major area of study, 75.8% of respondents were freshman, 19.7% were sophomores, 3.5% were juniors and only .6% were seniors.

As a group, student attitudes about community service as part of the curriculum, as a way of connecting to the community, and felt a willingness for opportunities to complete community service activities were positive. Collectively, student responses of their attitudes toward community service activities were not significantly different between Survey I and Survey II, with the exception of their commitment to continue to volunteer because of the activities and experiences they had in the course. Comparing the mean scores of this question was found to be significantly different at $p \leq .001$. Their experiences through this semester enhanced their commitment to continue to volunteer.

However, when participants were divided by gender there were significant differences in their responses to Survey I. Table 1 presents the questions that were found to be significantly different between females' and males' mean score responses. When comparing the mean scores of student's responses for these same questions when asked in Survey II and again segmenting students by gender, the means were no longer significantly different, with the exception of student's intent to continue to volunteer and their reported enjoyment of participating in the volunteer activities. Female students responded more positively in their intent to continue to volunteer as a result of their community service learning experiences (4.42 v. 3.97) and in their enjoyment of the community service experiences (4.38 v. 3.98). However, both females and males mean responses were significantly different in the positive direction between Survey I and Survey II when asked if they would continue to participate in community service activities as a result of their community service in the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Regarding Student Attitude</th>
<th>Female Response Means</th>
<th>Male Response Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to coming to college my involvement in community service</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed my community service experience.</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will continue to volunteer in community service activities because of my previous experiences.</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is appropriate for college students to volunteer in the community as a way of giving back.</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like an opportunity to participate in a community service/volunteer experience while attending college.</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service/volunteerism is out of place in today's universities.**</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think community service through volunteerism is an important way to interact with the community.</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe community service/volunteerism prepares students for working with a diverse work force.</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mean Scores based on a 5 point Likert-type scale. ** A positive response to this question response is reverse of all others.
# Significant at $p \leq .001$.
In both Surveys I and II, students who had participated in community service activities were asked to select from a list of eight potential benefits, those that they believed they had received as a result of their participation in service learning/community service. Table 3 presents the list of benefits that students were able to choose from, and the percentage of students that selected it from the list for both Surveys I and II. In Survey II, students reported five of the eight benefits more often than in Survey I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Survey I %</th>
<th>Survey II %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Satisfaction</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Skills</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Pride</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality Skills</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Building</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had Fun</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Students were able to select all that applied.

When addressing the true definition of service learning, researchers and theorists have agreed that for service learning to be a meaningful experience, the must have structure. Two important ways to provide structure for students in community service activities is to provide students with an orientation to the experience and for students to have an opportunity for guided reflection after the experience. In Survey I, students were asked if prior community service experiences included these opportunities. Forty-eight percent of the students reported that orientation was a part of their community service experiences and 44.4% reported that reflection activities were a part of their experience. Of those students who reported to have had an orientation and reflection opportunities 88.2% and 80.2% stated that these activities were important, respectively.

As stated in an earlier section of this paper, the authors provided students with opportunities to participate and reflect on community service, and the issues of poverty and hunger in America. In Survey II, students were asked to rate the value of these activities in helping them understand and empathize with the plight of those they served. During the three semesters of this project, students heard from guest speakers of community centers who help the disadvantaged, took a tour of the local Food Bank; were assigned reflective journal activities; and, were required to develop an e-portfolio chronicling their professional and community service accomplishments. For all activities and experiences, students reported a positive attitude toward the value of these assignments in their understanding and appreciation of the challenges citizens of their community face. Unfortunately, it is possible that student's responses on the survey were influenced by frustration with the grades they earned and not by the community service experience. It may have been difficult for some of the students to separate their attitudes toward the grading process and their in their community. Males appeared to have a more positive attitude toward completing the e-portfolio assignment. It should be noted that students were graded on the number of community hours they completed, the quality of their reflective journal assignments and the quality of their e-portfolios.

References


