

Retail Classroom Meets Business Practice through a Service-Learning Component

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is recognized in academia as a benefit to students, faculty, universities and communities. Within the community, businesses have the potential to partner with students on course-based projects. This article explains the process of creating and implementing service-learning courses in merchandising, incorporating a plan for incremental service-learning experiences by students. Junior and senior level courses were revised to provide service-learning activities and experiences closely aligned with original course objectives. After implementation, students and retail partners evaluated the courses, rating them highly with regard to increasing the depth of understanding of theory and its application.

Keywords: Service-learning, teaching strategy, merchandising, retail

Introduction

Opportunities for students to be involved with the community through their classroom activities enrich their educational process (Principles that Guide, 2006). Educators indicate that students who participate in projects using their classroom skills in collaborative ventures with community businesses generally show increased attendance, improved grades, and exhibit

greater developmental skills in personal and social responsibilities (Larios-Sanz, Simmons, Bagnall, & Rosell, 2011). Faculty desiring to provide their students with service-learning experiences may work through formalized service-learning programs on their campus and with nationally recognized programs, or they may choose to work more informally and directly with local businesses.

Course projects with a service-learning component provide an opportunity for application of academic theory to real-life situations (Service-learning, 2006). From an academic perspective, students learn from real-world experiences, departments benefit from collaborative partnerships with retailers, branded apparel and home furnishing companies, and other business partners, and universities improve relationships with the community. For example, textile and apparel students often have difficulty envisioning the frantic pace and the multi-tasking work load that manufacturers incur as they juggle multiple seasons and various stage gates within a single time frame. Time spent within the manufacturing environment and with company personnel (i.e., the process of service-learning) gives students hands-on experiences with this frantic pace. From the corporate or industry side, businesses receive needed input and cutting-edge information for their companies while establishing priceless contacts and networks with future employees. For example, a small design company in a service-learning partnership could receive valuable consumer information from an extensive and focused marketing study, performed by students. The students would provide their fresh approach as well as depth of resources available through the university data bases that otherwise would not be available to the small company. Textile companies, interested in working with a fabric, new to their product lines, may form service-learning partnerships with students in laboratory classes in order to receive information from test results using test equipment available in university laboratories not generally found in their company labs.

Background

Service-learning is “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection” (What is, 2011, para 1). Service-learning can be an effective educational tool

for students of all ages and can be applied to a variety of educational and other organizational settings. Service-learning is but one way for students to achieve experiential learning. Having a paying job or doing community service involves either employment or volunteerism -- both are experiential; however, service-learning involves the experiences of working within the community and solving work related issues with the beneficial effects of classroom direction. The “hyphen” in service-learning is there to remind all participants that learning is an equal partner in the work experience (Service Learning Faculty Handbook, 2011). In the merchandising and retailing fields, service-learning is differentiated from internships in that students in service-learning environments have more integration between instruction and their real world activities.

Need for Service-Learning

Classes using service-learning projects may be used to expand student learning into the real world, frequently providing students with experiences in countries outside of their home country (McCormick, Swan, Matson, Gute & Durant, 2008; Metcalf, 2010). The textile and apparel industries are global. The experiences that universities can provide for students are often restricted to campus laboratories and local businesses. With service-learning in partnership with global companies, students can experience business practices in multiple countries. Engineering and business educators already acknowledge that students need real world experiences to help them with the many challenges that they will face when employed in a real world setting. As companies face increased competition in the marketplace, they require students who are well prepared with more than textbook theory and classroom knowledge. Textile and apparel companies face an extremely competitive environment and definitely need employees who are “ready to hit the ground running.” In classes, faculty can give students projects that

simulate industry practices, yet service-learning can give students actual experiences. Service-learning is acknowledged as helpful in teaching students real world problem solving techniques. In today's job arena, both critical thinking and problem solving techniques are essential to the success of the entry level employee. Merchandising and retail graduates continually face these job challenges throughout their careers.

Often, merchandising and retail students lack background experience and knowledge and/or work experience in order to understand the application of advanced concepts and topics in the business world. Project-based capstone courses in business-related curricula provide students with the experiences needed to grasp better the advanced course material. For example, students need experiences in management, as a significant component of merchandising, in order to help make learning theory and strategies more relevant (Robinson, Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). Discussions about management issues and empowering employees to solve customer problems enable students to think about their reactions and their need to understand corporate policy; however, the experience of standing on a retail floor facing an irritated customer, a plausible scenario from a service-learning activity, will definitely help students feel, know, and learn how to react professionally. With experiences such as those found in a service-learning and project-based capstone class, students can more deeply grasp the nuances of management theories and strategies.

Developing a Service-Learning Class

Service-learning does not mean that the work for the instructor is lessened or that the responsibility for the student learning experience is shifted to the community organization or business. In fact, the reverse is true. Coordinating the course content with the project activities and the students' involvement with the service-learning

partner becomes a critical responsibility of the instructor (Robinson, Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). In any experiential activity, such as service-learning, the instructor must recognize the mutual responsibilities among the university, the community and the learner. Learning must be valued by all parties to ensure a high quality experience (National Society for Experiential Education, 1998). The instructor must take the lead in directing and molding the service-learning experience. A baseline of knowledge must be established by the instructor, with appropriate learning objectives carefully incorporated or molded into the service activities.

In designing a project-based course, the instructor must consider a number of options in order to make the most appropriate decisions for the class. These include the project objectives; the size, organization and responsibilities of the team; the course structure, content and format; and the types and frequency of evaluation (Volkema, 2011). Decisions about these elements of a service-learning course must be made, considering the skills and knowledge of the instructor and the abilities and background of the students. The experience must be a meaningful enhancement of the classroom content. Therefore, the instructor must prepare accordingly and monitor progress through a well designed feedback loop.

Numerous resources are available to assist faculty with planning and implementing service-learning experience for students. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse provides many resources online at <http://www.servicelearning.org>. In addition, many universities have Service-Learning Centers on campus to guide and support faculty and students in their service-learning endeavors. For example, The Center for Student Leadership, Ethics, and Public Service is positioned on the campus at XXX with information available at <http://www.XXX.edu>, and The Center for Student Engagement & Community Partnerships on the campus at ZZZ, with

information available at <http://www.ZZZ.edu>.

To establish a service-learning activity or component of a class or to create an entire service-learning course, the faculty must follow a number of specific steps. The first step in any class, including textile and apparel courses, is to review the description and goals of the class and to examine its objectives. Second, the faculty must identify community agencies, government departments or businesses who might become partners with the university. When looking for partners, a faculty could consider members of an industry board, alumni who stay in contact with the department or local businesses that provide internships to students. Other partnerships might be identified as faculty consider the learning objectives for the experience and the types of experiences that students need. For example, marketing and other research activities could be provided to firms at any stage in the fiber, textile, apparel and retail (FTAR) complex. In contrast, experiences with end use consumers would be indicative of partnerships with retailers. An experience that provided textile testing on new or different fabrics might be most appropriate for a fabric manufacturer as a partner but could actually be of interest to apparel manufacturers and retailers who need that type of information but lack laboratory facilities. In addition to determining who will be the service-learning partner, the faculty must consider that partner's role in providing orientation to and supervision of the students.

When goals and objectives are clear and partnerships are identified, the faculty must then determine the appropriate number of service-learning hours. Typical service-learning involves 10-20 hours of student activities extending throughout the semester (Center for Service Learning, 2011). These service-learning hours must be unambiguous, with students assigned pertinent activities in which they are to engage. For example, if students are

partnering with a textile firm, a determination should be made about the number and types of laboratory tests to be performed and the format of the data to be shared with the partner. Decisions must also be made regarding whether students will work individually or in teams. If teams are used, their formation and management must be delineated. Finally the faculty must decide how the students should document their learning experiences.

Reflection, Assessment and Evaluation

Reflection, assessment, and evaluation are equally important in the planning and implementation of a service-learning class. For example, the process of reflection helps convert the real world experience into fundamental and integrated knowledge (Manolis & Burns, 2011; National Society for Experiential Education, 1998). "For knowledge to be discovered and internalized the learner must test assumptions and hypotheses about the outcomes of decisions" (National Society for Experiential Education, para 9). Reflection refines this learning process for the student (Larios-Sanz, Simmons, Bagnall, & Rosell, 2011).

Thus, reflection papers are important (Robinson, Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). Students need time to revisit their experiences and share those with others. When students present information in a formalized format to their service-learning partners, they increase their understanding of the experiences plus provide valuable information to the partners (Robinson, Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). On the other hand, any presentation should be reviewed by the instructor, especially prior to presentation to any external partner or the public. Student portfolios also may be an outcome of the service-learning experience. Students then have tangible evidence of their experiences to take with them on job interviews.

In addition, assessment and evaluation, by instructors and students, are considered

necessary to refine the learning objectives, to test the quality of the outcomes, and to show direction for future service-learning activities. This feedback (i.e., assessment and evaluation) may be in the form of peer reviews, student journals or reflection papers, and final written project papers. Content exams and visuals presented to support the oral presentations may also be reviewed as a supplement to assessment and evaluation.

Service-Learning as Part of an Incremental Curricular Experience

Research in the health care industry indicates that a series of service-learning and internship opportunities are helpful to students (Anderson, Royster, Bailey, & Reed, 2011). And the technique of providing students incremental experiences outside the classroom is growing rapidly in this field. Capstone courses offer experiences that build on previous courses (Metcalf, 2010). Examples of universities using multiple classes and a coordinated effort to thread a service-learning component throughout the curriculum are noted in academic literature (e.g., Larios-Sanz, Simmons, Bagnall, & Rosell, 2011). For example, a small service-learning project can be introduced in a mid-level class. The students have a focused project requiring a few hours with the business partner. Next, a summer internship follows this mid-level course. Then, a senior-level or capstone class, requiring extensive hours in service with a business partner throughout the semester, culminates the sequence.

Service-learning has a long history in the health care field and has been valued for the benefits of improving student learning. In addition, current research is reporting added benefits of changing attitudes for both students and faculty (Furze, Black, Peck, & Jensen, 2011; Goldstein, Calleson, Steiner, Frasier, & Slatt, 2009). Research has shown that faculties as well as students grow in understanding and appreciation of public health through the use of service-learning experiences (Cashman & Seifer, 2008;

Manolis & Burns, 2011). And, recently, marketing and business courses have focused on integrating service-learning into existing marketing courses, often helping nonprofit organizations (Metcalf, 2011). The same benefits of service-learning that have been recognized in the health care industry may be realized by merchandising and retail faculty as they direct students through service-learning activities.

Academic Research on Service-learning

Service-learning in education is well-established and frequently documented in the fields of health care and engineering. Further, its importance is growing in business curricula with a recent increase in academic documentation. However, limited information about specific service-learning projects in the field of clothing and textiles is available, especially those involving merchandising and retail curriculum. Although clothing and textile type programs often require internship experiences, which provide excellent real world experience for students, these opportunities often are for semester long or summer experiences or they may include only selected students.

Although internships are an integral part of the programs of these instructors, the aim of this research and curricular revision was to provide all students with the opportunity for added incremental experiences. These authors were searching for interactive approaches or methods for students to experience the interface of textbook theory and realistic business practices and procedures, in order to help students integrate practical experience with retail theory. In addition, the instructors sought learning experiences that not only motivated the students to learn in-depth theory but also directed them to develop critical and problem-solving techniques applicable in their chosen career paths. Literature in other fields indicates that these approaches improve skills, increase learning retention, and create positive attitudes about the content and the industry (e.g., Larios-Sanz, Simmons, Bagnall, & Rosell, 2011).

Service-Learning Implementation into Merchandising Classes

Implementation of service-learning was proposed in two retail-based courses: a junior retail math course and a senior merchandising class. These courses were selected for service-learning activities because upper level students: (a) have a better background and a breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and experience upon which to draw for solving complex business problems, and (b) are more mature and better prepared to deal with retailers and financially sensitive data. In addition, the prerequisites to these upper level division classes prepared students for the market and consumer research and product development activities needed to complete the course projects and to provide valued work for the retailers. By using classes at multiple levels, incremental implementation was possible, allowing for additional experiences when joined with an internship usually taken by students within the same time period of these courses.

In each class, the students work in instructor-modified or self-selected teams to complete multiple-step semester-long projects in collaboration with a local retailer. Depending on the size of the class, four to six retailers per semester are usually selected to work with each class. The most cooperative retailers are, in general, small locally owned and operated businesses but may be regional or national chains. Most of the retailers are apparel-related firms with women's and children's clothing being the primary product; however, students have worked with home fashion and gifts businesses, a bakery, and bookstores. Having a segmented target market, an emphasis on fashion, and the desire to have quality merchandising are common themes across many channels of distribution and numerous product classifications.

For a retailer to be appropriate for selection, the owner needs to be willing to share

information about the organization and history of the business, the target customer, and some financial details. Students need to be able to take photographs of the interior and exterior of the store, and they need to be able to interview customers and vendors. This partnership requires a level of trust between students and retailers. Occasionally, a privacy agreement is needed so that the financial information is held in confidence with only the student group and the instructor having access. While retailers do not have to be local, they must be easily accessible to the student groups. For example, some students have chosen retailers in their home town.

Process of Retailer Selection and Approval

Preliminary to teaching a service-learning class, the instructor must determine if he/she will work independently or will work with the service-learning office on campus and/or one of the national organizations (e.g., National Society of Experiential Education [NSEE]). On many campuses, all three choices are available to instructors and each method may be appropriate. Working with an on-campus or national agency has benefits including consultants to provide insights, higher visibility and business partner contacts; however, paperwork may increase and some restrictions may apply. For the purpose of these projects, the students' service-learning activities were conducted independently of formalized service-learning organizations, yet were recognized by the researchers' respective departments, colleges, and campus service-learning centers as service-learning activities. In any of the above scenarios, it is the instructor's responsibility to identify the types of interactions students will have with the business partners, what information will be shared – in both directions, and the number of hours of contact or work with the retailer that is expected of the students.

To start the service-learning projects, student teams were formed in each class.

Because these are junior and senior level courses, the students self-selected their teams with guidance and adjustments made by the instructors. Student teams should be formed with care because a semester-long project requires that a team function effectively; both course grades and future employment may be affected. Students are given guidance on team formation including skills needed, such as software expertise, math or accounting skills, and research abilities. Students should also consider their own work demands, their presentation skills – both written and oral, and their typical work habits. Based on the experiences of previous student teams, these instructors advise that being best friends does not necessarily make the best composition for a team. These instructors usually give students a 48 hour period to assimilate the class information and to form their team compositions.

Once the student teams have been formed, they meet to “adopt” their retailer of choice. In each situation, the teams must follow set guidelines to formalize their retailer choice. After their first team meeting, the students must meet with the instructor to declare their retail partner selection. Each retailer must be approved by the instructor before any student-retailer contact is made. This clearance procedure avoids multiple teams approaching one retailer, reduces the number of times a single retailer can be approached during a year or a series of years, and assists students in making choices that will become workable partnerships. In some locations, where the college is located in a small town, the instructor may desire to control how often a retailer is approached for participation in a service-learning project. In addition, some national chains are unlikely to agree to the partnership; students should be advised by the instructor about the likelihood of success with those retailers. Based on the experience of these authors, local retailers are eager for the collaboration and often seek opportunities to be involved in the academic programs. Thus, upon

approval by the instructor, selected retailers are invited by the students to participate.

The team must make an appointment with the management of their chosen retailer in order to confirm the company’s willingness to participate. This informational interview is imperative because the students must receive approval not only from the store manager but also the district manager, if required, so that the store employees can provide needed information for the project completion. The students must also receive permission to take photographs within the store. A “verbal agreement” may seem sufficient; however, a formalized written and signed agreement is recommended. The contact person is often the key to the success of the information gathering stage for a project.

In the final step of the retailer approval process, student teams must report the outcome of the informational interview to the instructor. If a formal agreement is used, paper work is submitted as part of the course requirements; or if sufficient, a team may submit an email notice directly to the instructor or place it in the class digital drop box. This selection and approval process may take up to two weeks because the store manager is often busy or not available. Time must be allocated for the completion of the process because the students are unable to start their work without the retailers’ input.

Typical Data Collection and Class Projects

Store and customer research. In both the retail and the merchandising class, students must prepare a foundation of information about the company. This basic information includes history of the company, ownership and organizational structure, and other retail cues (e.g., price strategy, fashion positioning, trading area analysis, marketing and brand strategy, retail/vendor matrix and merchandise mix matrix) about the firm. If the company is publicly traded or appears in the media, some information can be

collected through online sources while other data must be researched in library business journals and periodicals. In addition, the students may desire to interview the retail owner, store manager and sales associates in order to provide an in-depth profile of the company.

In addition to company background, the students prepare a comprehensive background of the retailer's target customers. Surveys of store customers are important ways for students to learn more about the retailer's target customers. Survey data can be collected through face-to-face interviews, the retailer's website or Facebook page, or emails to the retailer's customers. The students also include information from both academic and trade articles with analysis relevant to the target customer groups for the retailer, providing an in-depth market segment analysis of the target market. Although formal Institutional Review is often not needed for data collected through classroom activities, instructors should check with their campus Human Subjects Review Board about policies related to data collection, especially if a widespread or public distribution of the data is anticipated.

The initial learning part of this project is evident in the research that the students collect, but less evident is the experience the students obtain in developing surveys and questionnaires and analyzing data and interviewing customers. Helping students prepare a readable and informative report of customer data is part of the class learning activities. Although most retailers should know their customers, these authors have found that collaborating retail partners are delighted to receive the survey data and often exclaim about how much more they know as a result from the student surveys about their customers.

Retail math projects. Projects in the retail math class include the development of a six month plan and a detailed assortment plan that is market ready with vendor addresses and detailed market city information.

Students must work closely with their retail partners to request financial data such as markups, markdowns, and expected sales figures to create the plans. Although some retailers are hesitant to provide detailed data, most are willing to share general financial information. At this stage in the process, student teams conduct informational interviews with divisional merchandise and/or store managers, buyers, department managers and sales associates in the department for which the Six Month Merchandise Budget and Merchandise Assortment Plan is being created. These student teams discuss their research findings with the retail experts and inquire about their logic and approach for creating a realistic, workable business plan and budget for the department or store.

With the use of real world data, the students become more involved with the planning process when they realize that someone other than the instructor will see the outcome of their calculations. The retailers are often impressed with the details of the plans they receive. Some retailers are introduced to new calculations and financial perspectives that they might otherwise not perform. Retailers also gain information about new product lines for their target customers, and about potential vendors to supply those products.

Merchandising class projects. The senior merchandising class has more emphasis on product development and marketing of new products in addition to the work with the financial aspects of a retail business. Because this is the second course in the incremental service-learning series, the students in the merchandising class select their retail partners at the beginning of the semester and work with them to complete all of their class projects. They are expected to spend more time with their retailers, provide the retailers with more feedback, and bring more skills and knowledge to their experiences. The projects for this class include development of a new product line with detailed product specifications for

some items and other projects using the information learned in the retail math class. Using feedback from customer surveys and retailer interviews, students create fashion and technical sketches and develop product line assortments with detailed fabric and sewing specifications for the proposed new products. In another project, students prepare marketing strategies to promote the new products.

For these additional product development and merchandising projects, students need product development skills such as Illustrator, Photoshop, and quality specification writing. Information from textile evaluation and production courses also is needed. Students in these classes realize early that a good team means that someone in their group has the necessary skills to cover all activities. Retailers, who do not have a background in clothing and textiles, are often impressed with the creative ideas of students and find the student presentations to be inspirational and helpful in creating exciting new fashion items for their target customers.

Reflection

Reflection for the students was addressed in several ways. During various stages in the retail math class and after student teams finalized specific components of their project, students were asked to share their individual team findings with the entire class. Student teams reflected on skills needed to complete each component, how their previous knowledge base was utilized to solve real world problems, and skills and knowledge most needed to be successful in an actual work experience. In the merchandising class during the regular team meetings with the instructor, students were asked to provide reflection on their progress with the retail partner and to consider how they saw the information from class being used in the real world.

In both the retail class and the merchandising class, at the end of the semester students were asked to provide

reflections of their experiences. Examples of questions included how the experiences fit with their classroom experience and how each student had changed throughout the semester in his/her understanding of what retailers did in their jobs. For the retail class, a final reflection paper was required. For the merchandising class, open-ended questions were posted on the online class server asking students to provide reflection. The postings were anonymous so that students were not concerned about the impact of their statements on their grades. This reflection is in contrast to the reflections done in the team/instructor meetings that were open and discussed in the group. In consideration of the incremental approach to the service-learning activities, the merchandising students were also asked to reflect on how the experience helped them to use information from previous classes and how this became integrated into their project work.

In the merchandising capstone class, the students were asked to complete a final project that involved a review of the entire semester which, in turn, became a review of their curricular studies in the program. They were asked to review all of the activities within each of the course projects and select an activity that they thought contributed extensively to their retail partner's bottom line. Each activity was documented through a poster (24 x 36) that the students prepared, which was reviewed and approved by the instructor and then printed. The collection of the posters was presented as a senior show with a reception in order to honor the retail partners. The senior show also allowed students the opportunity to share the course information with other students, staff and faculty. Each student team was required to be available in order to provide information to visitors. This show became both a reflection and a class celebration.

Team Management and Evaluation

Working with teams is a fact of employment in the apparel and retail business. These revised courses have been taught for several

semesters, and students entering these courses know ahead of time that they will be working in teams throughout the semester and that they will need a retail partner for the service-learning components. This team aspect needs management and evaluation similar to the management of the class projects. As previously mentioned, teams must be formed with care. But, that is just the beginning. Throughout the semester, teams often require a change in team composition and may also need guidance by their instructors on how to interface with their retail partners.

Some training in team management, if not taught in a previous course, can be very helpful to the instructors and the teams. On campus resources may be available for this assistance from such centers or departments as the Career Services Center, Human Resources Department, or Dean of Students' Offices. Regular meetings called by the instructors with the teams are also important in maintaining a healthy, workable team environment. Team-instructor meetings are required in these courses and are part of the student's grade. Expectations for each meeting are clearly announced before team meetings are scheduled; however the instructor also must be flexible and deal with any and all issues that arise or are perceived in the meeting. According to feedback from the senior classes, these meetings are more important to the students than any formal, in-class instruction.

Not only does the instructor record progress achieved by the teams but also the student should have a vehicle for evaluating the performance of her/his team members. The evaluation of teams is important because, even in the best of classes, individual member performance is not standardized and team members may become frustrated by a member who does not perform at the expected level or produce the quality of work expected. For the team to excel, this lack of performance by one member requires extra work by other members. On the other hand, an overbearing team member should

also be noted. Good team function is an art that requires practice and maintenance. Team member evaluation forms are confidential between the student and the instructor, are required for submission at set periods during the semester, and include rating scales and open-ended comments for student justifications of their peer ratings. The instructors use these ratings to weight the grades of team members. This process is similar to giving team pay to modular production teams and bonus pay to members who are rated exceptional by their peers.

Outcomes

The retailers who participate in the programs receive a copy of the student team's final project report. This final report may be in a notebook form, a CD with a PowerPoint or other formats appropriate to the project and/or requested by the retailer. All retailers receive an in-depth analysis of the target customer. In the retail math class, the team provides both a six month financial plan and a product specific assortment plan for the retailer. In the senior merchandising course, the team prepares a merchandising plan, including spec sheets and costing calculations for a private label product that would be a new product line for the retailer. In addition, the team prepares new promotional ideas for reaching the retailer's target customer and a promotional budget for implementing the planned activities.

Class lectures, handouts, and industry appropriate forms are used to coincide with the assigned projects and data collection process for the students. When retailers see the students using these class materials in the stores, they may ask students for copies. This occurrence is highly compatible with the concept of service-learning because it contributes knowledge to retailers and improves the self-esteem of students who realize that they are contributing to their retailer's well-being. Projects with a service-learning component also assure students that the university curriculum provides them with the foundation that they need for

success in the real world. Some students return from an interview with the retailer saying “I didn’t understand this concept in class but seeing it in action in the store made it make sense for me.”

Final Evaluation and Revisions

Feedback from these classes has been very positive. End of the semester student evaluations contain comment sections where the students often say “this was my favorite class,” “I loved working with my retailer,” and the favorite of these instructors, “I was offered a job because of my work with Retailer X.” In a recent survey of alumni, the senior merchandising course was listed as the course that best prepared them for their current job. Because of strong student enthusiasm for this project and industry advisory board support of the concept, the service-learning component will continue to be an integral part of these retail and merchandising courses. A faculty member recently said that having students involved in projects with a service-learning component “opens two doors for my students: the door to reality and the door to possibility” (Wemhoener, 2006).

Benefits and Limitations of Service-learning within Textile and Apparel Courses

The benefits to students from service-learning are numerous but the primary one is the exposure to the world of work. Specifically in the FTAR complex, students benefit from understanding the competitive pressures that companies experience from their vendors, their competitors, their customers and the final end consumer. Students must be ready to multitask, to make sense of huge volumes of information, and to make difficult decisions involving far-reaching financial consequences. Although faculty members discuss these real-life situations in class, students are better prepared, even with limited time involvement, through on the job experience. They reflect their service-learning

experience and preparation in their feedback: “I never would have believed how many things my supervisor did in one day,” and “this was definitely not a desk job – my feet hurt at the end of my shift.” In some areas of the FTAR complex, students working in companies are able to see equipment and processes that were previously available only through diagrams in textbooks. For example, small schools that lack the funding for body scanning equipment or electron microscopes may place students with companies that routinely use these items in the normal work day.

Faculty also benefit from service-learning. Partnerships with industry keep faculty current with industry practices. Partnerships can also result in the donations of new and used equipment or supplies to the course or the department. In addition, faculty gain credibility with students when information from class is experienced in the students’ work with a company. Students have said “Wow your book was on my manager’s desk.” or “They really did markup just like we did it in class,” and “My manager asked me to look up a test method and I knew right where to find it because of my textiles class.”

Finally, because the industry or community partner also benefits from the situation, the service-learning partnership is a win-win-win situation. Some small specialty retailers have commented that their service-learning students were able to conduct research beyond the skills of their current employees. Students sometimes explained a financial concept to them that they had never completely understood. Larger retailers also benefit from service-learning partnerships. For example, they could gain from new information and outside views that students bring as well as students’ expertise with social media and other technologies. Manufacturing companies, both textiles and apparel, benefit from the marketing skills that many students possess.

Service-learning, with all its benefits, is not without its limitations. For students, the limitations begin with the time and transportation necessary to travel to the partner company. For universities located in rural areas or areas not populated with FTAR companies, transportation and time necessary to reach the company is a major limitation. Therefore, for schools in areas not populated with potential service-learning partner companies, service-learning courses may be limited to summer studies or winter/short terms. Being a “new kid on the block” and assimilating into a functioning team is another issue that students face when they are involved in service-learning and at a company for only a few hours each week. Professional dress and appropriate safety equipment also may be a limitation for students who might work in specialized work environments.

Perhaps the most important limitation for faculty includes the increased time expenditure both in preparation for the service-learning class and in the additional duties needed to conduct the class. For example, these instructors estimate that a service-learning class may almost double the amount of time in preparation, supervision and grading in comparison to a conventional class. Another limitation for faculty is finding appropriate and willing partners to offer students service-learning. Again, geographic locality is of concern because faculty travel time and expenses are also limitations.

In addition, a limitation in the FTAR complex for both faculty and company or community partners is the issue of confidentiality and proprietary information. Because of the timeliness of information and the innovative processes occurring in FTAR companies, students and faculty may be restricted from specific activities within companies. Obtaining and maintaining confidentiality agreements are possible but may not be deemed cost effective when students are with the company for only a semester. Further, issues concerning student

insurance coverage while involved in service-learning may also be a concern and create possible limitations for all partners in a service-learning event.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of these authors in writing about their experiences with service-learning projects within clothing and textiles curriculum is to share their experiences with those who might aspire to use this type of learning technique. These instructors encourage others to assist their students in becoming involved in the community. The rewards for these instructors certainly outweighed the added work. Implementing service-learning projects into the curriculum has strengthened relationships with local retailers, improved students’ learning and retention of course content from their earliest courses to their senior-level classes, and motivated students to learn more about retailers, target consumer markets and current industry issues. These benefits are positive, tangible results of the service-learning experience. Although additional time and expenses were incurred in comparison to the conventional classroom, the benefits to students, faculty and industry partners are considered to all partners as a win-win-win situation.

By using incremental execution of the service-learning projects, these instructors have educated their students in methods to approach and work with industry partners and have improved their knowledge of and attitudes about retail. As a more tangible and profitable result, a number of students from the two programs have received internship and job offers as a result of the service-learning projects.

The detailed process of implementing service-learning into a course has been described for two merchandising classes; however, service-learning may be integrated into other courses about the FTAR complex. For example, many college programs covering the FTAR content require students

to take marketing-oriented FTAR classes and conduct research projects. At the same time, many small companies and some large firms need improved marketing information. Potential service-learning partners could come from any segment of the FTAR complex. For example, UNIFI, VF Corporation, Springs Global, Springs Creative, and Belk have provided service-learning experiences for students. In addition, companies and nonprofits serving as auxiliaries to the FTAR complex such as York Properties (real estate) and Cotton Incorporated have also indicated a willingness to serve as partners with these faculty and their students. For future service-learning, these instructors are examining additional courses within the curriculum where this incremental chain of learning can be incorporated. Students and other faculty have suggested that some of the introductory courses (e.g., textiles or introduction to the fashion industry) be included in the incremental sequence and include a very brief, perhaps individual student service-learning project. In addition, these authors recommend that research be conducted to corroborate the positive, but subjective, changes these instructors have seen in their students.

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