ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN SERVICE LEARNING INITIATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF SCHOLARS IN ACTION

Amiee Mellon, University of Montevallo
Tom Sanders, University of Montevallo
Emily Vonbartheld, University of Montevallo

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are encouraged to align with community efforts to collaboratively address civic, social and ethical issues of the day. The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the restructuring of a unique service learning partnership Scholars in Action (SIA) between a public university, its county government, and local nonprofit organizations. Using insights from service learning research and management theory, this case study offers an analysis of the limitations of the current service learning program; describes how the effectiveness can be improved; and examines how changes can be made. Initiatives for program improvement included: Enhanced marketing efforts, tracking return on investment measurements, and increasing retention measures.

The study unfolds by providing a background on service learning and comparable initiatives. Program deficiencies are then introduced, which include failing to meet stakeholder expectations and scholar performance gaps. Next, the paper details three main goals of the restructure: (1) increase focus on stronger retention measures, (2) enhance targeted marketing techniques, and (3) eliminate the causes of systematic issues (e.g. the ability to monitor and track hours and developing planning worksheets for large-scale events). The paper then discusses how restructuring of current management processes and introduction of new marketing procedures improved program participation. Lastly, the paper examines the shortcomings of the current program and potential limitations for other universities wanting to implement this procedure.

There are several takeaways from this case study. First, detailed explanation regarding the importance of the program during interviews and increased group meeting participation increased program retention. Second, focusing subject lines on student emails, asking current SIA for referrals, and hosting events in well-populated areas increased target marketing, and thus overall applications for the program. Lastly, using a simple, easy-to-access tracking form (like Excel) helped eliminate many systematic issues.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Educational institutions in the U.S. are increasingly being challenged to deliver degree programs that are market-relevant in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies to their graduates, as well as provide employment connections (Schlee & Harich, 2010). Service learning programs have been reported to lead to self-development, a responsible and global mind-set, ethical literacy, cultural intelligence and interpersonal community building skills (Subramony, Segers, Chadwick, Shyamsunder, & Dooney 2015; Mosakowski, Calic, & Earley 2013; Crossan, Mazutis, Seijts, & Gandz 2013). As a result, experiential learning, including service learning, approaches via formalized volunteering, job shadowing, internships, cooperative work-study arrangements, among other options, are growing in popularity and use in colleges and universities (Weise & Sherman, 2011). Better understanding this emerging educational phenomenon is useful for enhancing its positive impact and furthering its adoption. A growing body of literature documents the benefits of service learning programs and the need for greater engagement by higher education institutions (Burch, Giambatista, Batchelor, Hoover, Burch, Heller & Shaw 2016).

It has been shown that community service and civic engagement have positive effects on students, including increased civic and cognitive thinking and greater employability after graduation (Auld 2004; Astin & Sax, 1998; Hall, Lasby, Ayer & Gibbons, 2009; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Service learning has also been found to be an effective approach to intergenerational knowledge transfer (Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Voelpel 2017). Therefore, higher education institutions are encouraged to align with community efforts to collaboratively address current civic, social and ethical issues (Boyer, 1990, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Jacoby, 2003). Many higher education institutions have increased community engagement within their strategic plan, often focusing on the framework of campus-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Sandy & Holland, 2006). To be fruitful and develop promising relationships, emphasis is placed on the importance of managing these community partnerships (Babiak, 2007; Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2012). Thus, it has become increasingly important for more studies to contribute to the knowledge of campus-community partnerships (Cone & Payne, 2002).

Case studies have been used to examine experiential learning approaches, including service learning. For example, four such studies were used to compare the impact of differing experiential learning approaches, including service learning, for groups of social entrepreneurship students to help them develop self-efficacy in their ability to positively impact social change (Smith & Woodworth, 2012). Service learning case studies are also used as an approach to addressing complex social issues (Brower 2011). For example, a service learning case study was used to examine the importance of "place-related" context for learning about social entrepreneurship and innovation in enriching student's understanding (Elmes, Jiusto, Whiteman, Hersh, & Guthey 2012). Case studies have also been used for evaluating service learning research. For example, a case study evaluation of "Project Ulysses," an integrated service learning program that sends participants to work in cross-sector partnerships with NGOs in the developing world, found evidence of learning in key areas related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels of competency (Pless, Maak, & Stahl 2011).

The purpose of this case study is to provide an analysis of a unique service learning partnership Scholars in Action (SIA) between a public university, its county government, and local nonprofit organizations. Using insights from service learning research and management theory, this case study offers an analysis of the effectiveness of service learning programs; describes how their effectiveness can be improved; and examines how changes can be made to these programs. First, the authors provide an overview of key concepts related to service learning and management theory that provide a conceptual framework for this analysis. A brief history of the SIA program is provided along with a review of the primary factors that created the need for a major restructuring of the program. Next, primary areas that were the focus of organizational change planning; organizing; leading; and controlling are discussed. Finally, results of the organizational change effort and recommendations are discussed.

SERVICE LEARNING AND MANAGEMENT

Service learning, defined as learning through applied community projects, has been found to improve skills to prepare students for the 21st century workforce such as practiced and applied knowledge, teamwork skills, and civic engagement (Sabat, Morgan, Perry & Wang 2014). It is a teaching-learning method that combines academic, and oftentimes discipline-specific, instruction with local civic engagement (e.g. Zlotkowski, 1998; Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Service learning has been found to help students manage the commercial logics of social enterprises (Romani, Larroude, & Barbosa 2017). It has been found to be a particularly useful pedagogy for helping students bridge and reconcile competing institutional logics (e.g. social-welfare, and public-sector) (Pache & Chowdhury 2012).

Three pillars are important to achieve valuable service learning. First, to successfully engage students, concepts of civic engagement and collaborative learning must be properly connected to the lessons learned in the academic course material (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006). Second, to increase the effectiveness of service learning initiatives, both internal (e.g. students and professors) and external (e.g. NPOs and county) participants need to be aware of the expected outcomes. When community supervisors are aware of the expected outcomes, both from an academic standpoint and a student standpoint, they can use this information to model the experience in such a way as to achieve these outcomes. Third, to enhance the outcome for future projects, service learning programs rely on communication from both the internal and external environment. This open line of communication provides beneficial learning opportunities to both the students and the professors. Through an open line of communication, students involved in service learning can be coached and managed (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Management is often characterized as a process for creating coordination by organizations to more effectively and efficiently align with the demands of forces and stakeholders in their external environment (Mintzberg, 1990). Typically, the management process is depicted as a series of four unfolding, yet highly interactive, stages: planning, organizing, leading and controlling (Lussier, 2012). Planning concerns determining key results, goals or objectives, the organization needs to attain to effectively align with environmental demands and stakeholder expectations. Organizing involves acquiring and deploying resource inputs, including human resources, to efficiently accomplish key results. Leading is the process of influencing internal and external stakeholder to motivate engagement and performance. Controlling involves monitoring actual versus planned results and taking corrective action as necessary to assure their accomplishment. This process provides a useful approach to bringing about proactive organizational change to address performance problems and seize new opportunities.

SCHOLARS IN ACTION

Scholars in Action (SIA) is a partnership program between the County Community Services organization and the local university. The goal is to serve community non-profit organizations (NPOs) by placing 25 student scholars at NPOs within the county. Through this program, the university provides NPOs with resources while giving students the opportunity to develop invaluable skills, gain experience, and build a network. Because students may face barriers to participation, including the need to undertake additional paid work due to the rising costs of education (e.g., Evans & Saxton, 2005), SIA provided a $2000 stipend to the students.

After nearly a decade in operation, it became apparent to all participants that changes were needed. SIA was launched in 2006 and managed for nine years by a College of Education professor, who was also the town Mayor. She and her staff (i.e., administrative assistant, rotating graduate assistant, rotating interns, and SIA Ambassadors prior student participants) operated more than six different programs through the Service Learning and Community Engagement Office at the university, including the SIA program. To focus on other initiatives, both the professor and the administrative assistant stepped down from the SIA program in June of 2015, leaving this initiative without leadership. In August of 2015, a new part-time Director of Service Learning (DSL) from the College of Business marketing faculty took office. As SIA was a relatively large and high-profile program for the university, it was imperative to maintain and improve the effectiveness of the program and the community relationships related to it. To ensure successful transition and overall management of SIA (e.g. Babiak, 2007; Misener & Doherty, 2012), the DSL led a review of the program involving all key stakeholders. The management process was used to guide the review, action planning and implementation necessary changes to sustain program viability.

PLANNING

The first step after the transition in leadership involved a situational assessment to determine stakeholder expectations for the program, performance gaps, and tactical and operational goals needed for improvement. In order to accomplish the assessment, the new DSL met with key internal stakeholders (e.g. university administrators, key faculty members, current and past SIA students and staff members) and external stakeholders (e.g. county officials, NPO leaders, other community leaders) to identify strengths and weaknesses in the SIA program. The first issue related to retention of student scholars in the program, primarily due to low perceived benefits, dissatisfaction with agency assignments and/or personnel, and issues with program structure and decision-making. Second, a number of specific operational issues were identified, such as: scheduling notification and flexibility, tracking of service hours, payment procedures, matching of students with agencies, and dependability of students. Third, there were significant concerns regarding the impact and effectiveness of the program, such as quality of the program and some service experiences, student learning outcomes, benefit to the participating agencies and to the community, and overall cost benefit of the program to the county. While this review revealed a significant number of performance gaps, it also identified strong commitment to the program by all stakeholders.

Goals were established to address each of the performance gaps as quickly as possible given the impending relaunch of the program in the fall of 2016. These goals were (1) increase focus on stronger retention measures, (2) enhance targeted marketing techniques, and (3) eliminate the causes of systematic issues (e.g. the ability to monitor and track hours and developing planning worksheets for large-scale events). In order to create reasonable expectations and a timeline for when items could feasibly be completed and maximize strategic impact, measurable and timely goals were developed. Specifically, the new SIA team addressed the following areas: organizing human resources, addressing systematic changes, and controlling the changes and overall program restructure.

ORGANIZING

With a marketing background, the new DSL brought a corporate-style structure to the program. Two strategic moves were made to facilitate a smooth transition. First, the DSL immediately hired a graduate assistant (GA) with a business background to support the reorganization. Second, during the change process, they held weekly meetings with county representatives to ensure both internal and external stakeholder needs were being addressed (e.g. Boyer, 1990, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Jacoby, 2003). The first item addressed concerned expectations of human resources, both of the new staff and the scholars.

Human Resources: Staff

First, change in program management led to an immediate call for change in expectations and performance outcomes required of SIA participants. To minimize redundancies in the communication structure, the DSL managed communications with the students, while the county managed communications with the NPO directors. This led to a clearer understanding of who would handle specific issues as they arose (e.g., Babiak, 2007; Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2012). For example, for the first meeting of the year, the county would notify the NPO directors while the DSL would contact the students.

Prior to August 2015, the Service Learning Office had several staff members. Together, they were involved in many programs because they had the staffing to facilitate multiple programs. Under the new leadership, the office consisted of only the DSL, the GA, and an Ambassador (former SIA student) all of which were part-time. Thus, SIA responsibilities and activities were divided between the members as follows: the DSL managed the syllabus and course requirements; the GA managed deadlines for timesheets and other SIA schedules; And the SIA Ambassador visited classrooms and shared with students the concept and perks of the SIA program. Using an online application, each individual tracked their tasks and time so as to better understand which duties were being effectively managed, needed more attention, and were labor-intensive.

Human Resources: Scholars

Second, the program management team addressed recruitment of new SIA participants. The focus of the DSL was to develop the program into a more efficient and accountable venture that delivered value to the students, the NPOs, and the county (e.g., Cone & Payne, 2002; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Sandy & Holland, 2006). New leadership saw the program as an opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience in real-world situations and benefit the community by furthering the social contributions of the NPOs.

Program management implemented strategic changes throughout the selection process, starting with recruitment. Previously, the only recruitment method used was the ambassador visiting classes and talking about the program. To increase the applicant pool with viable candidates, the management team (1) reached out to both current and former SIA, asking for candidate recommendations, (2) presented to different populations on campus, such as the Honors College and the Trio Program, and (3) set up booths at high-traffic areas, such as the cafeteria.

Next, the team focused on interview scheduling. Previously, as each student turned in an application, s/he would receive a call from the GA to schedule a time for an interview. The GA was manually coordinating the scheduling, matching times that all parties could meet; oftentimes, this led to a large span of time between each interview. Leadership addressed this by first agreeing upon large blocks of time for the interviews, then segmenting the time into 20-minute slots. An online sign-up page (e.g. www.SignUpGenius.com) was used to email interviewees and track responses. If several time slots were left open, the GA would call applicants who had not yet signed up to fill those slots. This process not only increased user-friendliness, but also allowed early applicants to be the first permitted to sign up, thus giving timely and responsible students an advantage.

Systems and Procedures

Despite being an excellent program, SIA had issues with time tracking and on-site accountability. In response, the third initiative was to develop an easier, more sustainable timekeeping procedure that helped students be more accountable. The previous tracking system was an online, paid service that required students, NPOs, and the DSL to log in and track hours. Both students and NPO directors found this system to be cumbersome, glitch-ridden, and generally unhelpful. The DSL developed a new timesheet using Microsoft Excel. Students input their hours and emailed them to their director; the director then approved these spreadsheets and emailed them to the GA. To help scholars manage their time obligations, specific hourly goals were given on their timesheets. Time sheets were then input into a larger spreadsheet that summed monthly hours, calculated over/under status of hours, and totaled the stipend amount the SIA would receive for the month. This system allowed leadership to maintain a database of all hours worked by each student throughout their tenure as a scholar. Additionally, these spreadsheets simplified the process by utilizing a program all users could easily access.

Next, program leadership addressed accountability issues. For simplicity, scholars had been paid a stipend of $200 per month, regardless of hours completed. The new leadership team agreed that the payment structure needed to be changed from a lump sum to a payment based on percentage of the required hours completed.

Table 1
PAYMENT PER SEMESTER FOR COMPLETION OF HOURS

Fall (140 hours)	$848.49
Spring (150 hours)	909.09
Summer Term (40 hours)	242.42
Total (330 hours)	$2,000.00

For example, if in spring the student worked 120 hours out of 150, they would be paid 80% of the total stipend ($727.27) because they completed 80% of the total hours. This new system reinforced the idea that scholars had to accomplish their work commitments each week if they wished to be paid.

LEADING

Leading the scholars proved challenging because they had little that connected them with the SIA program. At the time, many students viewed SIA as a way to make additional money while volunteering; They did not view it as an experience where they would gain useful working knowledge related to their community and their academic field of study. The importance of their contributions to the program and the NPOs was not explicitly explained to them. To create a paradigm shift in the minds of the student scholars, program management promoted the program as a trial run in a safe environment (the local community) where students could apply field-specific skills to the working world.

Recruitment through Marketing

Applications to the program had been sparse because SIA was not well known around campus. Scholars were often placed at NPOs that did not necessarily suit their needs as a student or benefit the NPO with agency relevant skills and innovative ideas. Aside from the SIA Ambassador visiting classrooms, there was little to no promotion of the program. In addition, the primary applicant pool had been social work and psychology majors, but NPO needs are not limited to the capabilities of these particular majors.

To address these needs, leadership first developed college-specific flyers to attract students from a broader array of programs and majors. New marketing materials included key words from the NPO descriptions that pertained specifically to the students enrolled in those colleges. For example, taglines on the College of Business flyer included: "develop promotional materials", "manage and coordinate special events", "host budget-training consultations", and "engage with local professionals". In contrast, for the College of Education, taglines included: "conduct education events", "provide nutritional guidance", "engage with local professionals", and "provide learning assistance to youth". These were unique to the four colleges on campus. In addition, there was a generic flyer created to post in common areas such as the cafeteria and residence halls. The intention behind this targeted marketing was to demonstrate to students how opportunities at NPOs were directly related to their fields of study. Second, the Ambassador's visits were essential to the success of this venture because these visits placed a relatable student in front of other students; thus, it was important to increase and track the number of classroom visits made. During these visits, the Ambassador discussed benefits of the program which ranged from gaining valuable experience to establishing a network of successful professionals. Because tangible evidence of an organization increases awareness (Quester, 1997), the Ambassador distributed promotional materials (e.g., pencils and water bottles) to increase program visibility across campus.

CONTROLLING

Despite having been in operation for nine years, SIA had yet to complete a programmatic year with a full roster of 25 students; this was due to either a lack of applicants or mid-semester dropouts because of a lack of fit with the NPO. Thus, the county tasked the DSL with increasing retention. To do this, the DSL simultaneously focused on recruitment and student training. First, by increasing marketing efforts (e.g., Quester, 1997), a more diverse applicant pool was created. This allowed the SIA selection process to put greater emphasis on fit between applicants and NPOs. Second, during the interview process, program leadership discussed the importance of the scholars – the value of their work for the NPO and the impact they were having on the clients of these agencies. Third, once the scholars had been chosen, leadership made themselves readily available. Office hours allowed students to come in and discuss any issues they were having at their NPOs or seek assistance with projects they were working on. Fourth, interactions between the scholars increased. This was accomplished through monthly meetings. These meetings were a chance for scholars to hear stories and connect with their colleagues; hear updates and receive positive reinforcement from program leadership; and participate in self-improvement workshops. These self-improvement workshops included a variety of topics such as writing a resume, fighting burn-out, and writing grants. While only 20% of scholars had previously attended such sessions, participation increased to 80% through email reminders and personal contact. Lastly, leadership strengthened the lines of communication and the number of meetings between the county, the university, and the NPO directors, allowing for faster solutions to be found.

RESULTS

By the end of the first semester of the restructured program, SIA was at full capacity of 25 students for the first time in the program's history. In order to continue this success, program leadership tracked return on investment in terms of time and effort using both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative measures included the response rate from broadcast call-to-action emails, click-through rates on program update emails, and responses to a "How did you hear about us?" question on the SIA forms. Qualitative measures included student reflections and feedback from participating NPOs. Tracking return-on-time-invested had not been previously done; thus, the only numbers to compare year-over-year are the overall number of SIA applicants.

For the spring 2016 recruiting campaign, leadership sent out a broadcast call-to-action email with the subject line, "Positions Available for All Majors!" This email generated a relatively substantial amount of interest. The broadcast system reaches more than 2,000 students, and the direct interest response emails totaled 64 students, a 3.25% response rate. However, the actual impact far exceeded this response rate because many students who had previously never heard of the SIA program were now aware. In conjunction, several program-related emails were sent with trackable hyperlinks so that leadership could see what garnered the most interest from students. Faculty also learned more about the SIA program and other activities in the program, leading to more faculty allowing the SIA Ambassador to conduct classroom visits that semester. When asked "How did you hear about us?", SIA Ambassador and other student-to-student recommendations were noted in 17 out of 24 of the total applications received in the summer/fall 2016 recruitment process.

Table 2
CLICK-THROUGH RATES ON FSIA RELATED CONTENT

Content Type	Title of Content	Click-Through Number
Website	Scholars in Action homepage	18
Website	Campfire USA homepage (a mentoring program)	58
Article	"Proof that Volunteering Pays off for Job Hunters"	9
Article	"Why Volunteering is a Smart Career Strategy – and 6 Ways to Get Started"	9
Article	"Volunteers More Likely to Land Jobs, Study Finds"	6
Article	"More than just a Resume: Share Your Volunteer Aspirations on your LinkedIn Profile"	5
Article	"Why Volunteering is Good for Your Career"	8

Qualitative measures included both reflections from scholars and discussions with the NPOs about the quality of the program. Reflections are important because they help control the service learning experience and develop it into something more meaningful for the student (The

Impact of Service-Learning: A Review of Current Research, 2007). These confidential reflections were completed on a monthly basis and submitted to the DSL. Scholars were given little guidance on what should be included in the reflections; this way, they were more comfortable discussing how they felt and what was important to them. Reflections were kept in a secure place, accessible to the student, allowing them to see their growth within the program. Additionally, if there was a problem in one of the reflections, the DSL was able to offer guidance to the Scholar and find ways to mitigate negative experiences.

NPO and county directors also provided feedback on programmatic changes. Positive and negative feedback was encouraged for continual improvement upon SIA processes and procedures. NPO directors reported that the quality of students had improved since the restructuring initiative, and they were also pleased with the improved hours-tracking system.

PROGRAM DEFICIENCIES AND FUTURE INITIATIVES

In its current state, there are deficiencies in the current approach. First, staff is limited. In order to further the success of the program, leadership must focus on enhancing Ambassador recruiting activities without drastically increasing time requirements. This can be done by developing videos for recruitment and education. For example, using videos that explain the NPOs and their needs as well as the role of the scholars would be beneficial to marketing and obtaining funding for continuation or growth of the program. Additionally, the DSL can also offer peer-to-peer referral incentives to current SIA.

Second, tracking of SIA Ambassador time investments needs to improve. One way to accomplish this is for the Ambassador to measure which class visits offer the greatest return of applicants by tracking which classes s/he has visited, how many applications were handed out, and how many were completed and submitted. The Ambassador can develop specialized speeches to deliver at the different colleges to show students that a scholar’s time at their NPO is in-part based on what the scholar would like to accomplish in their career.

Third, better targeted marketing efforts can be implemented. Tracking the typical applicants’ residential situation, access to transportation, age, classification in school, and intended career goals (e.g., whether or not they intend to be involved with non-profits) can help provide additional marketing efforts to ensure a diverse applicant pool, which would lead to greater selectivity in the placement process.

Lastly, there has not been growth in the program since inception. Once it has been shown that SIA can maintain a steady retention rate, program expansion should be considered in order to benefit more students and NPOs.

IMPLEMENTATION LIMITATIONS

There are also limitations to the approach outlined. First, while a using a dedicated SIA Ambassador was imperative to the success of the program, it may not be an option for some programs. To overcome this limitation, staff can increase marketing efforts toward professors and student advisors, emphasizing how SIA ties directly to his/her program. Second, a variety of NPOs allows for a more diverse recruitment process. If it is not possible to use a diverse group of NPOs, staff can focus recruitment messages on the importance of making connections within the community and the value of extended community volunteering on one’s resume. Lastly, some universities have strict policies email communication with students. To ensure SIA messages are arriving in student mailboxes, the staff can discuss the best email communication strategy with both the IT and University Relations departments.

CONCLUSION

While benefits of community service are well-documented and many universities are making great strides at increasing civic engagement, students oftentimes face several barriers to participation, including the need for paid work due to the rising costs of education; this reduces the time available to participate in such civic engagement activities (Evans & Saxton, 2005). For service learning programs, it is important for everyone involved to be aware of the intended outcomes and perform continual evaluations to ensure the program is meeting all the stakeholders needs (Babiak, 2007; Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2012). Students must be monitored and coached to ensure the greatest benefit is achieved from these efforts (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). This analysis offers examples of a number of methods that can be utilized in order to increase participation in service learning programs; improve the performance of these programs; and measure the impacts made by these programs. This paper also shows how classical management functions can be followed to implement restructuring of any program. Although programs differ across the nation, all service learning initiatives require a mutually beneficial relationships and reflections as a qualitative tool of progress and may benefit from using this paper for guidance.

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