

Student Perceptions of Engagement in a Mandatory Programmatic Service Learning

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Abstract

In the hospitality industry, service-learning opportunities are particularly important for students seeking work in the meeting and event planning industry. Faculty of a hospitality program at a regional university in East Texas decided to investigate the benefits in embedding service learning activities to their hospitality courses. The study investigated student perceptions of their participation in compulsory service learning assignments were created and implemented. Service learning assignment benefited the respondents personally; it benefited the sponsoring organization; it benefited the respondents' career goals and their own individual awareness of community issues.

Keywords: Hospitality, Service-Learning, Community Engagement, Experiential Learning, Benefits of Service Learning

Introduction

Service learning and community engagement are examples of hands-on activities that hospitality students can do. Faculty members indicated that service learning invigorates both their teaching and their students' learning. By integrating course content with real-world experience, service learning has tremendous potential to meet faculty goals for student learning while making unique contributions to addressing critical community needs. It enables students to deepen comprehension of course content, integrate theory with practice, increase understanding of the complexity of social issues, and sharpen their abilities to solve problems creatively and collaboratively – all skills that are highly valued in the workplace (Bart, 2012). In addition, community engagement is the process of building relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with an ongoing partner, in any and every way imaginable, building an army of support for the mission, with the end goal of making the community a better place to live (Gottlieb, 2006).

In the hospitality industry, service-learning opportunities are particularly important for students seeking to work in the meeting and event planning industry. O'Halloran and O'Halloran (1999) identified characteristics of service learning opportunities for hospitality students with great implications for learning experiences and client needs. In the fall 2015 semester, the faculty of a hospitality program at a regional university in East Texas decided to investigate the benefits in embedding service learning activities to their hospitality courses. Thus, study to investigate student perceptions in their participation in compulsory service learning assignments was created and implemented. The objectives of the study were the following:

- (1) To examine whether service-learning assignment personally benefitted the student.
- (2) To determine whether the student's participation in service-learning assignment benefitted the sponsoring organization.
- (3) To determine whether the service-learning opportunities were beneficial to the student's career goals.
- (4) To determine whether the service learning assignment increased the student's awareness of community issue or events.

Literature Review

Multiple studies have recommended that there is a need for hospitality and tourism educators to plan their teaching and learning activities so that student learning preferences are recognized, and the gap between educational practice and student learning is minimized (Barron & Arcodia, 2002; Lashley, 1999; Lashley & Barron, 2006; Lashley & Shaw, 2002; Stevens, Kitterlin & Tanner, 2012). Numerous authors (Hsu, Smith, & Finley, 1991; Stevens, Kitterlin & Tanner, 2012) suggested that the action-oriented hospitality industry attracts creative problem solvers and individuals who are good at executing tasks that further recommends that hospitality students prefer to learn from action-based situations. Furthermore, hospitality students prefer opportunities for practical activity and respond well to ‘hands-on’ teaching and learning styles (Barron & Arcodia, 2002; Dale & McCarthy, 2006; Lashley, 1999; Stevens, Kitterlin & Tanner, 2012).

Lawson and Lawson (2013) note that federal policymaking is driving decisions related to offering opportunities for students to engage more deeply at the postsecondary level. The question of whether or not service learning increases student learning has been studied across disciplines. Warren’s (2012) meta-analysis of the topic found that service learning has “positive benefits such as increased multicultural awareness and enhanced social responsibility.” Further indications of benefits from service learning for both the students and the community include the building of the students’ relationships with community members beyond their own generation and backgrounds and the appreciation of their concern for the community (Kirk & Riedle, 2005).

Methodology

The service-learning component was a required assignment as reflective in the syllabus. The students were required to complete and work three 2-hour events or two 3-hour events for a total of six hours. The sample of the study was students who were taking hospitality courses in the fall 2015 semester. A survey questionnaire was developed in Qualtrics and was administered online. Of the 92 responses received, 82 responses were usable. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used where 1 represented *strongly disagree*, and 5 represented *strongly agree*. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Respondents remained anonymous, and there was no identifiable information with regards to the respondents. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

Results and Discussion

This section revealed the profile of the respondents’ academic level and their majors. In addition, the information below indicated whether the objectives of the study were achieved. Table 1 indicated that of the respondents, 41% were seniors, 24% were juniors, 18% were sophomores, and 16% were freshmen. Majority or 72% of the respondents were students who majored in hospitality administration (HADM), 17% of the respondents were food, nutrition, and dietetics (FND), 2.4 % were business management, 1.2% were fashion merchandising and the rest were business marketing, chemistry, family and consumer sciences, human development and

family studies, history, international business, kinesiology, mass communication, multidisciplinary studies, psychology, theater and undecided.

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Respondent's Academic Level		
Freshman	27	16.4
Sophomore	30	18.2
Junior	40	24.2
Senior	68	41.2
Total	165	100.0
Respondent's Major of Study		
Business Management	4	2.4
Business Marketing	1	.6
Chemistry	1	.6
Fashion Merchandising	2	1.2
Family and Consumer Sciences	1	.6
Food, Nutrition and Dietetics	28	17.0
Hospitality Administration	119	72.1
Human Development & Family Studies	1	.6
History	1	.6
International Business	1	.6
Kinesiology	1	.6
Mass Communication	1	.6
Multidisciplinary Studies	1	.6
Psychology	1	.6
Theater	1	.6
Undecided Major	1	.6
Total	165	100.0

Table 2 revealed the respondents' point-of-view in terms of the benefits of the service learning assignment to them personally, to the sponsoring organization, their career goals and their own individual awareness of community issues. All the respondents agreed (Mean = 3.80) that the service-learning component benefited them personally. In addition, the respondents agreed (Mean = 4.01) that their participation as volunteers benefited the sponsor or the organization who requested the hospitality program for student's assistance. This clearly indicates that the respondents were able to help the organizations in whatever activities they had the respondents do for them. In terms of the benefit of the service learning assignment to the respondents' career goals, they agreed that they got something out of their experiences. This established a network for them that could help them for their career once they graduate. Furthermore, the respondents indicated (Mean = 3.75) that participating in the service learning activity increased their awareness of what's happening in the community. This made them more akin to the festivities or issues that the community is doing.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents' Point-of-View on the Benefits of the Service Learning Assignment Personally, Sponsor Organization, Career Goals and Awareness of Community Events

Research Questions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
RQ1: The service learning component benefited me personally	165	3.80	1.44
RQ2: My participation in service learning was beneficial to the sponsor or organization where I volunteered	165	4.01	1.43
RQ3: The service learning opportunities I participated in were beneficial to my career goals	165	3.30	1.64
RQ4: My participation in this service learning component increased my awareness of community issues and events.	165	3.75	1.39
Valid N (listwise)	165		

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

Based on the results of the study our objectives were achieved. Overall, the service learning assignment was of personal benefit to the students, and at the same time, their participation was beneficial to the sponsoring organizations. Furthermore, the service learning assignment enhanced the career goals of the students. And the best of all, the service learning assignments increased the student awareness of community issues and events. The results were consistent with Kirk and Riedle (2005) findings that there are reciprocal benefits to both the students and community. Service learning provides students with opportunities to develop civic engagement skills. By working with community members, students can enhance their communication, organizational and interpersonal skills. They also can gain important experience working with diverse members of the community (Starting Point, 2018; retrieved from <https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/service/why.html>)

Implications

Respondents' benefits of service learning include enhanced opportunities for learning and personal and social skill development. In addition, students gain increased knowledge of academic materials, their communities, and themselves. Furthermore, respondents can gain a better understanding of themselves as they explore and develop ways to contribute to their communities. They can also develop self-confidence and an enhanced commitment to public service.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are vital:

- Continue using service learning as a programmatic assignment of the hospitality administration courses.

- Continue collecting data from the students to see if there are trends that will stand out about the assignment.
- Nurture the relationships with the organizations so they will keep requesting students to help them with their events or activities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited within the scope of the students who are taking courses in the hospitality administration program in a regional university in Texas. Results cannot be generalizable beyond this population. However, other schools can do a similar assignment if the faculty wants to adopt the service learning activity. Based on the results and similar findings from this study, the researchers will continue the service learning assignment to extend data to develop a longitudinal study. A study to determine the satisfaction of the sponsors or requesting organizations should be undertaken.

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