

Merciful Practices of a Business Program: A Case Study

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Abstract

The service-learning experiences provided by the Business & Economics Department are carefully crafted to exemplify the Mercy mission at Salve Regina University. By practicing what they are learning, and teaching others what they know, students are able to retain a higher percentage of that which is taught. It also gives them the opportunity to put their knowledge and skills to work, moving beyond a conceptual understanding. The additional benefit of the integration of Mercy culture in learning provides an opportunity for students to act in service to their communities and experience how valuable their skills are to others. Students who have completed the service-learning program have commented about expanding their knowledge, improving their communication skills, and increasing feelings of accomplishment as they work with diverse groups and individuals. As educators, we want to ensure there is an understanding of the benefits bestowed upon some and the responsibility to others who are less fortunate.

“While we place all our confidence in God, we must always act as if success depended on our own exertions” -Catherine McAuley

Introduction

Can business be merciful? Six years ago, the Business Studies & Economics Department (henceforth, Department) at Salve Regina University drafted and adopted a mission-integration statement. The

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statement, in part, expresses the Department’s intent to seek “. . . to maintain an inclusive environment that promotes sensitivity to cultural diversity, human rights, human needs, social justice, social responsibility and environmental stewardship. . .”¹ This paper provides a case study of the Department of Business Studies & Economics Department and its evolution since this first step to better integrate the University’s Mercy mission.

Since the adoption of the statement, the Department has worked to identify ways in which its members—students, faculty, and staff—could embrace and implement the Mercy mission. Many programs have taken shape over the last several years. One such program was the adoption of a component of the curriculum that has been successful in providing opportunities for all members of the Department to participate in service-based programs, thus promoting a Mercy culture within the department. Service-learning, according to Learn and Serve, America’s National Service-Learning, is “. . . a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”²

This paper will begin with a definition of mercy, the University’s mission statement, and the Department’s mission-integration statement. The focus of the remainder of the paper will be on the use of service-learning programs to promote the Mercy mission within the business program, including the opportunities and challenges of providing service-learning experiences for Department faculty and students.

Defining Mercy

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, mercy is defined as follows:

1 a: compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power; *also:* lenient or compassionate treatment <begged for *mercy*> **b:** imprisonment rather than death imposed as penalty for first-degree murder; **2 a:** a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion **b:** a fortunate circumstance <it was a *mercy* they found her before she froze> **3:** compassionate treatment of those in distress <works of *mercy* among the poor>.³

¹ Ronald W. Atkins, *University Business Studies Assessment Manual* (Newport: Salve Regina University, 2001).

² Learn and Serve America’s National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, “Service Learning is,” http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php

³ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “mercy,” Merriam-Webster online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mercy>

Defining mercy as compassion, as in “to show mercy,” limits the definition to one aspect. To identify an unjust situation is not necessarily to show mercy. Mercy requires an act, as in “an act of mercy.” For the Department and for the purposes of this paper, mercy is defined as both compassion *and* action. This implies that without action, mercy has not occurred. As the mercy experiences are discussed, this article will present that mercy as action often produces a more profound experience for students, and a greater understanding of the Mercy mission. In this case, action has been employed as service-learning experiences. When departments offer students the opportunity to participate in curriculum-related service-learning experiences, they can better relate the Mercy mission to the business curriculum, and use their business skills to practice mercy.

University Mission Statement

Understanding the University’s mission statement is key to appreciating why employing the Mercy mission via service-learning programs is so important to the Department. The University mission statement is as follows:

As a community that welcomes people of all beliefs, Salve Regina University, a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy, seeks wisdom and promotes universal justice.

The university through teaching and research prepares men and women for responsible lives by imparting and expanding knowledge, developing skills, and cultivating enduring values. Through liberal arts and professional programs, students develop their abilities for thinking clearly and creatively, enhance their capacity for sound judgment, and prepare for the challenge of learning throughout their lives.

In keeping with the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy, and recognizing that all people are stewards of God’s creation, the university encourages students to work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful.⁴

Service-learning actualizes the mission when students are taught about the importance of working to make a “. . . world that is harmonious, just, and merciful.”⁵ By offering students opportunities for practicing the mission with the skills they possess in their chosen field of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ University website, “Our Mission.” <http://www.salve.edu/about/>

work, they are given the chance to recognize the power and value of their skills, and the impact students can have in the community.

Working Toward Mission-Integration

Recognizing the value of a liberal arts education and the importance of the Mercy mission, the Department collaborated on the development of a mission-integration statement several years ago. This statement provides a direction for the Department in the development and operation of curriculum and programs, and was created in collaboration with the Vice President of Mission and Planning.

At least six of the members of the Department have participated in the two-day collegium that describes the history of the Sisters of Mercy and discusses the role of the Mercy mission. During this retreat, faculty members from many departments discuss the meaning of mercy and how to integrate the Mercy mission into programs and classes. The development of service-learning programs in business was a direct result of faculty participation in the collegiums.

The mission-integration statement developed by the Department states:

The Department of Business Studies & Economics provides programs and courses of study that educate, expand knowledge, develop skills, and cultivate enduring values in individuals who are inquisitive, motivated and desire to be professionally prepared to meet the identified needs of business for the 21st century. The following goals support the departmental objectives:

- To provide a professional environment that develops strong, positive leadership skills, personal responsibility and accountability
- To provide a supportive environment in which students and faculty know and respect each other and their peers
- To provide an organizational culture that promotes learning
- To develop students' research, analytical, and problem solving skills
- To develop students' interpersonal and communication skills, including listening, writing, verbal and presentation capabilities
- To maintain an inclusive environment that promotes sensitivity to cultural diversity, human rights, human needs, social justice, social responsibility and environmental stewardship
- To develop students' skills in the technologies and competencies relevant to their programs of study and the needs of the competitive, global, business environment

- Develop and implement programs that provide opportunities for students to integrate learning with service to the community.⁶

The last bullet speaks directly to the service-learning programs developed in the Department. Other parts of the mission-integration statement support the use of these programs, and include recognizing social justice and human needs, taking responsibility, being accountable, and promoting learning.

Millennial Students

The traditional undergraduate of this private Catholic university is from the Millennial generation. The Millennials (born 1981-1999) have a unique set of values and insights.⁷ Another term used for Millennials is Echo Boomers as the generation's size, education, and technical skills seem to echo the effect of the Baby Boomers on society and businesses.⁸ As the children of idealistic Baby Boomer parents, Millennials have been called entitled and empowered. This is due, in part, to their inclusion in decision-making since childhood.⁹ According to Lancaster and Stillman,¹⁰ the Millennials' personalities reflect the influence of the skeptical Generation Xers (their closest cohort) which has merged with that of the Baby Boomer parents and the Millennials' own pragmatism. As a result, they are described as "realistic". Millennials are said to be experiential, engaging, interactive,¹¹ as well as more socially responsible and concerned about community service.¹² Service-learning programs offer this socially concerned generation opportunities to practice their business skills while serving others.

Although the students may have an awareness of the need for social and community service, many have never been close to those who

⁶ Ronald W. Atkins, *University Business Studies Assessment Manual* (Newport: Salve Regina University, 2001).

⁷ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Random House, 2000); Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

⁸ Paula Allen, "Welcoming Y," *Benefits Canada* 28 (2004): 51-53.

⁹ Michael D. Coomes and Robert DeBard, eds., *Serving the Millennial Generation: New Directions for Student Services* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Lancaster, *When Generations Collide*.

¹⁰ Lancaster, *When Generations Collide*.

¹¹ Diana J. Skiba, "The Millennials: Have They Arrived at Your School of Nursing?" *Nursing Education Perspectives* 25 (2006): 370-71.

¹² Paula Allen, "Welcoming Y," *Benefits Canada* 28 (2004): 51-3.

are in need. Within their generation, there are still some without access to technology, tutors, and travel.¹³ Greater understanding of the responsibility to those who are less fortunate will occur by discussing these issues and encouraging students.

Depth of Mercy Experience

Part of the evolution of the Department is due to reflection on the depth of the Mercy experience for the students (see Fig. 1). Initially, mercy was equated with the recognition of business situations which were construed as unjust or unfair. These ethical conditions are relatively easy to identify in all of the business and economics majors: finance, accounting, management, administration, information systems, global economics, and marketing. An “ethics across the business curriculum” approach was used to encourage faculty to have these ethical discussions in the various courses and was the topic of the first stage of Fig. 1. Recognize Social Injustice.

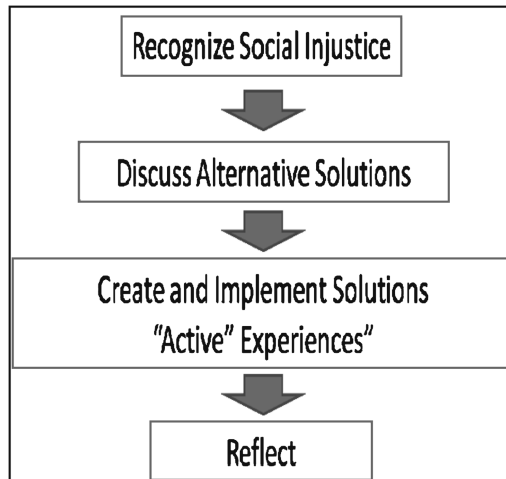


Figure 1. Depth of Mercy Experience

In addition, all business majors were required to complete an Ethics for Business course as a core requirement. This was how the Mercy

¹³ Andrew Brownstein, “The Next Great Generation?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47 (2000): A71-72.

mission was first implemented in the Department and continues today.

The second stage of the Department's evolution included the discussion of alternative solutions to these unjust situations. The solutions, however, were remote. The Department considered whether the industry recognizes the social injustices and, if so, how it deals with them. This analysis of various solutions gave students the opportunity to study organizations within the industry and to learn how they resolved these injustices. The goal was to provide students with different resolutions to these situations, so they might take them into the workforce after graduation. This problem-solution approach was a deeper Mercy experience in that it assumed that solutions were available, and that action was being taken by some organizations.

The natural progression led to developing a participative solution. In this phase, the Department recognized that active experiences during students' college years provided an opportunity to take action and to overcome some of these unjust situations immediately, instead of waiting until the students entered the workforce. An important benefit to this step was that the Department could identify situations where students could participate in solutions by practicing business skills. This allowed students to increase their retention of course material and improve their skills while practicing the Mercy mission. Moreover, when a student performs curriculum-related, service-based work for a client—such as a nonprofit organization or underserved consumer—the student is able to add the experience to his/her résumé.

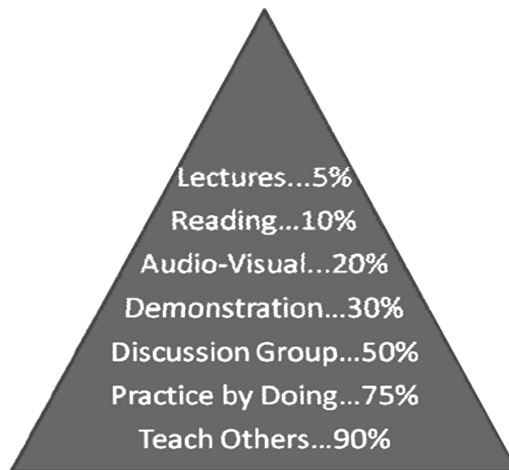
The service-learning experiences provided by the Department are carefully selected to embody the Mercy mission. For example, nonprofit organizations that operate with lean staffs and small budgets are often chosen as clients and paired with marketing students who have the skills required to accomplish the tasks needed by the organization. These clients have specific business-related needs that can be provided by the students. These action-based, service-learning experiences are opportunities for students to practice discipline-specific skills while helping others in need.

The opportunity to integrate academic learning, practical skills, and understanding the Mercy mission has been met with great success. Clients appreciate the assistance they have received, and students are eager to put their newly learned skills to work. They are also required to submit a reflection on their experience, which takes into account both the business skills developed and the application of mercy to their

chosen profession. A review of these reflections found that in addition to their business skills, students in the service-learning programs practice mercy, kindness, patience, and compassion. They have learned something more important than business theory, skills, and knowledge.

When developing the service-learning programs, the curricular focus is on identifying and recognizing social injustices within the discipline of business. This topic is discussed in many business texts in terms of ethics and social responsibility. Consideration of the issues related to the injustices and the potential solutions to these problems fosters decision-making skills, critical thinking, and compassion. Students develop the ability to create and implement their own solutions with skills learned in class. The fundamentals of teaching remain intact; only issues related to the course or discipline are included in the curriculum. But, unlike an internship or field experience that focuses on enhancing the students' professional skills, service-learning exposes students to an important part of the Mercy mission: "service within the community and lessons of civic responsibility."¹⁴

The academic integrity of the service-learning model is exemplified by The Learning Pyramid, created by the National Training Laboratories (see Fig. 2). Learning is more than conceptualizing; it is also about



The Learning Pyramid
National Training Laboratories

Figure 2. The Learning Pyramid

¹⁴ Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education," *The Journal of Higher Education* 67 (1996): 221-39.

practicing and developing skills. “The pyramid stipulates the average retention rate of information based on various teaching methods . . . the most effective methods, those that ensure the highest retention rates, depend on active experience.”¹⁵ On average, students retain 5% of what they hear in a lecture, 10% of what they read, 75% of what they practice by doing, and 90% of what they teach others.

Action-based service-learning programs currently used in the Department include those offered in Business Communications, Human Resources Management, Business Research Methods, Consumer Behavior, Microsoft Certification, and Marketing Strategies. More courses with the service-learning option are planned for the future. In addition, extracurricular community service opportunities are available through various academic clubs, such as the Accounting/Finance club with their Volunteers in Tax Assistance (VITA) program, and the American Marketing Association, which has won numerous national awards for service involvement. Each of these programs allows students, faculty, and staff to act within the context of mercy, education, and skill development.

Examples of the service-learning programs in the classroom include Human Resources Management, where students are paired with local, at-risk high school students to help them improve job preparedness skills. These include the development of résumés, practice interviews, and exploring different job opportunities upon graduation. Students in the Microsoft Certification class work with lower-income adults who wish to learn various Microsoft applications to improve their job prospects. Some of these adults become proficient and certified in the Microsoft applications. Students in Marketing Strategies work with a nonprofit client that has little or no marketing staff or budget. The students work to create a marketing plan to achieve the client’s goals, and may also implement some of the programs for the client.

Opportunities and Challenges

The action-based programs discussed above provide opportunities for students to practice what they have learned (increasing their retention of concepts), to take part in activities which will enhance their résumés, and to develop a culture of Mercy.

¹⁵ Dawn Duncan and Joan Kopperud, *Service-Learning Companion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), p. 12.

From an academic point of view, the most important opportunities come from enhanced learning. By practicing what they are learning, and teaching others what they know, students are able to retain a higher percentage of course material. Such an approach also gives them the opportunity to put their knowledge and skills to work, moving beyond a conceptual viewpoint. This learning through transference of their classroom-gained skills for the advancement of others achieves the highest percentiles of the learning pyramid. “Students learn best when they take an active part in the learning process.”¹⁶ The additional benefit of the Mercy culture being embedded in the learning provides an opportunity for students to do good and experience how valuable their skills are to others.

In the postexperience reflection, students have commented about expanding their knowledge, improving their communication skills, the feeling of accomplishment, feelings of worth and importance as they help others, experience of working with diverse cultures, and more. The following excerpts were taken from student reflections.

Service learning was a valuable experience that made me realize how fulfilling helping others can be. Seeing these women succeed in something that they’ve worked for was very satisfying for me, and it’s great to know that I helped them to achieve something that is such an asset in their lives.

From a strictly academic standpoint the project as a whole was a great way to encompass and include all the areas of marketing that I have studied over the past 4 years. The exciting part was that we were doing some good. We were actually helping a real place that needed some assistance. We were not just doing some hypothetical assignment out of a textbook.

After the project was completed, I was surprised to find that I was taught something from the experience as well. My personal communication skills improved because I pushed myself to speak and relate to other students to whom I normally would not have the opportunity. Furthermore, the course refreshed some of the basics that I had forgotten.

Academics aside, I also learned a lot about culture and how to interact with someone who has seemingly much different interests than my own. The background of these kids and my own is completely different, from the households that we were raised in to the activities that we do in our free time. In the beginning I found it a little hard to relate and talk but once we both started to get more comfortable a couple sessions in it made everything a lot easier. I found that as much as we are different, we have a lot of important similarities

¹⁶ Ken Petress, “An Operational Definition of Class Participation,” *College Student Journal* 40 (2006): 821-23.

as well. At a basic level, we were both looking to get the most out of life. We both have hopes and dreams for what we want to accomplish and we are both looking for the best ways to get there. I think that this experience will allow me to not be so shy in the future. I am not someone who would usually just go up and talk to someone new, but I think that this experience will really help me open up to new things.

By working with actual clients, students are able to note this experience on their résumé, and to talk about it during their interviewing processes. This is considered a value-added component of the program. In addition, service-learning provides a unique point of distinction for this business program, enhancing learning and celebrating the Mercy culture. These are all bonuses to the students and department.

Challenges come with any program. These include managing service-learning programs and clients, engaging students, integrating learning into action, and measuring success. One important challenge is identifying appropriate clients who will benefit from the students' activities. Appropriate clients may be at-risk high school students, adults looking to enhance their employment skills, or nonprofit organizations in need of marketing or management plans. A client must have a problem that fits into the learning outcomes of the class, fulfills the Mercy mission, and is accessible.

Since the primary mission of the university is to educate, that goal cannot be lost in the implementation of the program. Once identified, there must be an orientation of clients and students in order to set the expectations of both groups. The client must understand that the curriculum is to be incorporated into the program, and that the program may take additional time due to the learning process. Additionally, the client must understand that the instructor is a facilitator, assisting and advising students as they complete the work. It is important to set client expectations early and then to manage them throughout the process. Students must understand the purpose of the program and their role in it. Without such commitments from both sides, there may be dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Currently, the service-learning programs are voluntary and not all students or faculty participate. This leads to the issue of engaging students. Students receive one credit for successfully completing a service-learning project.¹⁷

¹⁷ This concept is supported by Robert G. Bringle, psychology professor and Julie A. Hatcher, education professor who are director and assistant director, respectively, of service learning at Purdue University.

We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.¹⁸

Students are motivated to participate by recommendations from past participants, the concern to enhance their résumé, and also based on community need. The current generation of college students has been exposed to numerous community service programs during middle school and high school. Their heightened sensitivity to neighborhood needs also has been a factor in their participation in the Department's service-learning programs.

The greatest challenge is integrating the service program into the academic requirements of the course. A great deal of flexibility is required to meet changing client needs while accomplishing course objectives. Although difficult at times, the challenge gives students a sense of what it is like to work for a real client.

Another challenge is measuring the success of the program. Students are required to write a reflection paper about their experience. The reflections are not standardized and do not contain more than anecdotal data. Measuring the success of the program from the client side has not yet been implemented, and remains an area full of promise.

Conclusions

As the Business Studies and Economics Department continues to foster opportunities for a Mercy experience, it seeks to expand the breadth and depth of the students' learning. Ideally, all students in the Department would have the opportunity to opt for a service-learning experience specific to their major at multiple points in their academic journey. Fortunately, there is a university-wide commitment to the program, including administrative support and assistance.

Offering the service-learning experience contributes to the Mercy culture of the institution, and, more specifically, the Department. It enhances learning, retention, students' skills, and résumés. Finding this fit is important to develop and continue the program.

¹⁸ Bringle, "Implementing Service Learning": 221-39.

The faculty member serving as facilitator of the experience must look for teaching moments. Clients often change their minds, so flexibility is important. For that reason, service-learning may not work in all courses. Having clear expectations for faculty, students, and clients matters. Improving measurement of student and client experiences is the next step. Client satisfaction and feedback should be—and will become—an important part of the learning process for the students.

Faculty and students have begun to provide additional help for the service-learning programs by writing grants to support and deepen the Mercy experience for the clients. Further grant writing to support larger projects will improve opportunities for both the clients and students. Investment and commitment to service-learning in the Business Studies and Economics Department at Salve Regina University will offer students the chance to expand their knowledge, improve their communication skills, and increase feelings of worth and importance as they help others. Providing educational opportunities that increase understanding of the benefits bestowed upon some and the responsibility to others who are less fortunate embodies the Mercy mission in our Catholic institution, and provides an example for others.

