

Communicative Benefits IN A Service Learning Project

*how a senior-level public relations class
provided a campaign and five-year plan for a nonprofit*

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THE BOYER COMMISSION ON EDUCATING UNDERGRADUATES (1998) report advocates that higher education should cultivate a sense of community which places primacy upon the interaction of residents of such a community/instructors and students (Shelton, Lane and Waldhart). Service learning is one way of creating such interaction. This was the case recently in a semester-long project for a group of undergraduate seniors with the assistance of a graduate student¹ who used the experience as a practicum. Students learned new concepts and skills while performing services for a nonprofit organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Learning

Service learning is described in a number of ways: as an integrative, team-based engagement with certain structural objectives (i.e., change for the client organization, clear parameters for students, faculty and clients) (Papamarcos, 2002); as an element that highlights the educational experience in service-learning assignments as much as the desirability of the service (Gujarathi and Mcquaid, 2002); as a means to connect meaningful service in the school or community with academic learning and civic responsibility (National Commission on Service Learning, 2001); as a form of experiential education in which students perform a project for a nonprofit agency (Tusker and McCarthy, 2001); as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain fully an understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of it and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; also Price and Martello, 1996; Mettetal and Bryant, 1996; Jarosz & Johnson-Bogart, 1996; and Beckman, 1997) (cited in Cameron et al, 2001).

Service learning has been supported with scholarly works that suggest that communication skills are also increased when students participate in service learning (Tucker and McCarthy, 2001) and, moreover, that the service learning component within an education course can enhance academic achievement, civic responsibility, career exploration and personal and social development (Lewis, 2002).

Service Learning and Public Relations

The subject of using actual or real clients in a public relations course was the focus of Aldoory and Wrigley's (2000) convenience sample of 30 students. They had participated in a public relations class with a real client and strongly agreed that it was an effective learning exercise, helpful in understanding real world situations, learning about public relations, and an effective use of class time (52).

Similarly, in the service learning exercise that is described in this paper, students in an undergraduate public relations management course, took on, as a client, a local chamber of commerce, developed a five-year plan for the chamber, conducted focus group sessions, and mounted an open-house campaign all within the 14-week period of a semester. At the heart of the entire project was instruction in basic systems theory – e.g., that organizations are living entities with boundaries, inputs, outputs and feedback which necessitates adjustments (McElreath, 2001; 13). The methodology of the project was instruction in the public relations process of research, planning, implementation and evaluation. An added bonus was what students learned about communication. They witnessed what happens when organizations do not communicate well with members, fail to follow-up with communication problems, and promote communication distance between board, administration/staff and the community.

METHODOLOGY

The Course Syllabus

The syllabus was divided into the same phases that Mark P. McElreath uses in his text, *Managing Systematic and Ethical Public Relations Campaigns* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2001) – researching, planning, implementing and evaluating campaigns. Students were senior level, and 11 of the 12 had had a survey course in public relations.

First Week: The problems of the chamber of commerce were outlined.

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The Problem

1. The chamber has had low or poor visibility in the area to nonmembers.
2. The chamber lacks a substantial membership base.
3. Previous members have had legitimate complaints.
4. There does not seem to be a history of a communication plan for previous members, and annual fund-raising activities are not always that successful.

The Research Phase (next three weeks)

This phase included a meeting with the XXXX Chamber of Commerce on February 6, 2002, during which the students presented the goals of the class and major web (internet) research about what various chambers of commerce offered for their members around the country. Also presented was the objective of the focus groups and a five-year plan. The chamber gave the students approval to move forward.

Next, students were instructed about the importance of mission/vision statements as statements of goals and objectives. As Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) explain, the mission statement commits the whole organization to accountability and should include goals, obligations, values and social responsibility statements of the organization (375). After group discussions, students decided not to offer changes to the present mission and vision statements of the chamber.

In explaining the systematic process of preparing a campaign or a five-year public relations plan, students were instructed that every event should be an opportunity for advancement of an organization with specific goals and objectives outlined.

Goals and Objectives

The class discussed what the objectives and goals of a plan or campaign should be and decided on the following objectives:

- to make the public more aware of the chamber
- to increase membership
- to educate people (members and nonmembers) about the chamber
- to offer chamber members specific benefits
- to update the web page and increase its attractiveness and completeness

Outcome goals listed by students were:

- Current members will be more educated by and about the chamber.
- Potential members will want to know more about the chamber.
- Website will attract new members.
- Chamber will become more aware of the perception the community has about it.
- Chamber will be more responsive to members' negativity and will reach out to solve issues quickly.

Campaigns and Campaign Strategies

Next, students conducted research about campaigns. One objective was to determine what kinds of campaigns for nonprofit organizations were found in the literature; a second objective was to demonstrate the need to target publics in any campaign; the goal was the implementation of a campaign for the chamber's open house event (celebrating their new building). Students each found two schol-

arly articles and gave reports about nonprofits and campaigns (three were discarded because the articles lacked relevance).

The Implementation Phase (next four weeks)

Target audience profiles – In order to know the best target audiences of the chamber, three focus groups were next conducted. The graduate student obtained all the participants. Students were given the option of volunteering at the sessions. Of the 12 students in the class, nine were able to participate.

Group (1) – The objective was to determine the sentiment and knowledge in general about the chamber from people who were residents of a local golf community.

Group (2) – Another objective was to talk to past members and learn reasons for their non-renewal.

Group (3) – A third objective was to talk to present members who were not very active with the organization but who were long-term renewals. The goal was to determine what kind of communication strategies were in place at the chamber.

At each focus group were six to nine people; all focus groups were conducted in succession; the chamber supplied sandwiches and refreshments for participants, but no member of the board or staff was present at the sessions.

After the sessions were complete, transcriptions were made by the graduate assistant who then met with the class; the class reviewed a list of all county businesses and determined that 17 percent of the businesses on the list had membership in the chamber. With this in mind, and with what students had gained from the focus groups, a "problems and opportunities" chart was developed (McElreath, 138).

Next, students returned to their research in nonprofit campaigns. In order to show them how the research could be applied to a proposed campaign, McElreath's "Variables in Public Relations Research" explained in Chapter 6 was used, which basically involves asking questions about the who, what, when and how of research and accounts for moderating and intervening variables as well as dependent and independent variables (207).

The Planning Phase (next four weeks)

Media characteristics – As part of the planning phase, an up-to-date media database had to be developed for the chamber as well as guidelines to follow when sending out announcements to the press. The graduate student succeeded in getting this done and reported his activities to the class.

The open house campaign and strategies for the campaign

Students felt they had a pretty solid understanding of the problems that were affecting membership of the XXXX Chamber and were ready to work on a campaign for the scheduled open house in April. They were next introduced to McElreath's (2001) planning characteristics for a campaign (Chapter 7) and the importance of outlining the plan. Students next prepared a Gantt Chart², a timeline listing of activities in chronological order (McElreath, 248). Students worked in pairs to prepare charts. They selected the best chart by a voting process in the class.

Next, students prepared posters (large post-its) with graphics and explanations about each event, and as a group, the class with instructor went to visit the chamber's president and chair of the Board of Directors where students gave a presentation explaining their ideas for the campaign.

Implementation Phase (next four weeks)

The open house event April 1 – Much to the disappointment of the students, the food tastes, balloonist, cheerleaders and disc jockey were not approved for the event. The president of the chamber felt that it [the chamber] already had too much of a festival perception, and they did not want to add this tone to the open house event since they considered the move into their new building an auspicious occasion. They would keep the wine-tasting event until evening, 5:00-6:00 p.m. The open house event was scheduled for April 26.

The research assistant that fortunately was able to work on this entire project during the semester helped a great deal in securing needed data from the chamber in order to begin work on the 43-page five-year plan.³ Students were instructed that the primary purpose of the plan book is to help build consensus among key decision-makers about the goals, objectives and future plans. The five-year plan book was organized into three sections suggested in the McElreath text (314):

Part I. Introduction – a short history of the Chamber and role it has played in the community as well as its evolution and where it is today.

Part II. Organization structure – sources of revenue, objectives and goals.

Part III. Organization structure and various issues addressed during next five years (risks facing the chamber, communication strategies and scripts, fundraising reform, organization self-evaluation, future trends and need for projected changes and a five-year timetable).

Evaluative Research Conducted (final two weeks)

All students participated in the open house event on April 26, 2002; each student had a scripted part outside one of the rooms of the new building to explain to visitors the history of the room and/or donors for the room. Because of course schedules, all students could not attend the all-day event, but instead worked in shifts of two to three hours during the day. At the formal ceremony, the university, the class and the instructor were thanked for their participation in the open house.

As a class, students attempted a survey about awareness of the chamber during the open house event; they approached visitors but learned very quickly that visitors were mostly the members. They had designed the survey to target community members who they thought would stop by. Altogether, they counted about 300 visitors and only 20 non-members on the day of the event. The caricaturist came and a large cake was brought in from a local bakery, but all other suggestions, except for the wine tasting, did not take place for the event. Students felt that not enough attention on the outside of the building was given to the open house either, so visibly most people did not notice anything special going on. The result was that the class could not conduct a worthy evaluation of the campaign nor gather any new information for the chamber.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Just before finals week, the XXXX Chamber treated the entire class to a dinner aboard a riverboat cruise during which certificates of appreciation were bestowed on them.

The five-year plan was completed after final exams, later than expected, and the instructor and the research assistant presented it to the chamber after finals week. The students had helped tremendously with the initial research, but the development of the plan – the actual writing and design – was left to the instructor. Since the open house,

many of the suggestions have been implemented, and an award for public awareness was given to the instructor and to the university at the annual membership meeting of the chamber.

In a short evaluation form, the instructor asked students to anonymously respond to some questions. Specifically asked were questions about use of class time, concepts learned about public relations and whether a service learning component should be repeated in the next public relations campaign class. All 12 students responded very positively to all three open-ended questions. One student wrote, "I cannot thank you enough. I could never have learned this better had I been on the inside of the chamber looking outward. This class will long be remembered."

About three of the seniors were still around campus the following fall semester finishing up courses, and all three have expressed how much they benefited from that one course last semester.

Clearly, the faculty member benefits also. This instructor was reminded that the intricacies of writing a public relations plan involve more than mere text; diplomacy was also an issue in the rhetoric and suggestions the plan would offer. Having worked with the communicative element within the chamber for the 14-week semester, the tendency on the instructor's part was to become a little too critical about the manner in which communication did or did not take place. The instructor had to be cautious about expressing any negative thoughts to the students, and had to constantly remind them that maintaining objectivity in their suggestions was very important.

Communicatively, students learned all the elements of group, organizational and interpersonal communication as well as public speaking. They presented well when expressing their ideas about the open house campaign and when volunteering to be spokespersons during the open house event. They gained confidence, which was apparent at the actual open house event. The instructor observed how they talked openly and on positive notes about their experiences with members. When working in small groups, students exhibited the typical trials – leaders taking control or not taking control, working out communication glitches, and working cohesively to accomplish goals. Their interpersonal communication skills certainly improved, as the instructor often talked one-on-one about what they were discovering in the project.

The caveat is that such a project was exhausting at times, and this instructor literally would not have been able to accomplish the five-year plan, especially, without the help of the master's candidate from a nearby university's college of journalism and mass communications, as well as the donor who funded the stipend to the chamber and the instructor's own dean, who supplemented the stipend for the assistant.

The client-chamber of commerce remains most appreciative of the experience and input (and rewards). After a year, a follow-up was conducted. They are apparently following many of the suggestions made in the five-year plan.

1 The graduate student, working on an M.A. in a public relations track at a nearby university, received a stipend from the local chamber and was given an office. The student helped in obtaining records at the chamber, working on databases for them, setting up the focus groups and assisting with the five-year plan.

2 McElreath outlines it in his text on pages 248-249.

3 Part 1. Introduction and the Table of Contents can be obtained from the instructor.

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