The "Next Wave" in Service-learning: Integrative, Team-Based Engagements with Structural Objectives

Steven D. Papamarcos, St. John's University

Introduction

Effective business education requires more than the memorization of facts. Indeed, it requires more than the organization of memorized facts into generic frameworks for understanding. For learning to be effective, students must be able to bring novel structure to unstructured situations, and to solve problems. For example, students who have studied the particulars of a case study exercise have gathered and perhaps even memorized facts. Similarly, students who have been exposed to today’s popular approaches to strategic and competitive analysis have accumulated and perhaps memorized organizing frameworks. However, all of this is of marginal utility, and effective learning has not occurred, unless these same students can select the appropriate model from those available, and modify it to fit actual situations. Only then can they competently investigate possible strategic factors, identify meaningful patterns in their findings, and integrate those results into a series of practical recommendations. Experiential education provides students with just such a personal learning environment. This type of learning may take numerous forms, from narrowly defined field projects, to paid and unpaid internships, to service-learning assignments. Our focus is on service-learning.

The potential educational and developmental benefits of participating in service-learning are reasonably well-documented. Findings indicate that the service-learning experience enhances student skill levels and academic performance [5,7,13,16,25,30,33,36], social responsibility and personal and value development [2,4,6,8,11,14,15,17,18,19,22,23,27,28,34] as well as self-efficacy and related constructs [21,26,29,31]. However, even the most recent data indicate that the vast majority of the literature addresses service-learning in primary-, middle-, and secondary-school settings [3,21]. The emphasis of this article is on service-learning at the college and university level, a much neglected, timely, and in our view, highly important topic.

Service-learning links service to the community with students’ academic and career goals. It challenges students through reflection and analysis to grow academically while experiencing the value of service [32]. It differs from other forms of experiential education in that academic advancement is not the only objective [10]. Ideally, the academic side enhances the service side, and the service experience supports academic learning. In our view, service-learning represents perhaps the most effective teaching tool available to the contemporary business school professor. However, in practice, it too often involves our students in activities that, while they may provide valuable introspective as well as academic knowledge, fail to fully leverage the skills of today’s business students. By introducing an integrative, team-based, and structural approach, we seek to take this very powerful pedagogical enhancement to the next level.

Given a general understanding of service-learning, “team-based” service-learning
becomes largely self-descriptive, involving, as it does, groups of students engaged in assignments too large in scale or scope for any one individual to complete in a timely manner. Our projects are dynamic and integrative. Students learn the details of a particular course content area; have the opportunity to develop, apply, and refine communication and interpersonal skills; interface with an actual client; develop the creative and critical thinking skills so prized in the business community today; engage in possible career exploration; and gain real-world experience that will be helpful in a prospective job search. Students also, often for the first time, confront the vagaries of a complex project where the key facts are not known beforehand. They must also address the shifting requirements of project work as facts are gathered and interim objectives evolve. Often, discovering the ambiguity inherent in real-world business challenges, and then learning to overcome it, is a major benefit of the service-learning experience. Yet, as important as it is for students to gain this knowledge, skill, and confidence, it is also notable that they do so while providing a valuable service to their community. "Structural objectives" refers to engagements that continue to "serve" after the semester has ended and the service-learning team has disbanded. Our projects have ranged from entrepreneurial ventures to the turnaround of sizable, heavily troubled organizations, and have on occasion involved a multinational component. All continue to affect the lives of others, up to three years later. Projects illustrative of the "new" service-learning include:

1. Inner-city, Private High School for Girls. Working with the faculty and staff, our students developed a detailed plan to satisfy the critical near-term objectives of this school—which had recently experienced a number of serious challenges to its continued operation. We also worked to establish an overall strategic direction and associated action plan for the realization of the institution's intermediate- and long-range goals. Based in large measure on the program developed by the student consultants, the school received substantial grant funding for implementation. We returned the following semester to assist in this effort. Results have been extremely encouraging, and the turnaround in the school was recently the subject of a feature article in a major newspaper.

2. Taxicab Company for People with Disabilities. Partnering with a well-known advocate for the physically challenged, our students established an urban taxicab company employing paraplegic drivers. Our team developed strategic and tactical operating plans for the venture; acquired and retrofitted two taxis with hand controls; sent a number of prospective drivers through "hack" training to get them licensed to drive a cab; and worked with the City of New York to have certain regulations waived to allow a wheelchair-user to drive a taxi. The company now has a number of drivers on the street and working.

3. Mental Health Association. This sizable not-for-profit provider of mental health care services asked the students to help solve a major problem: increasingly, the aging parents and guardians of this agency's clients are becoming concerned about the care of their loved ones once they (the caregivers) are unable to continue in that role and their mentally challenged adult children are left to face their problems alone. (Without daily care and counseling, many of these individuals cannot cope, and eventually are institutionalized.) We assisted in the establishment of case management services, developed a service-portfolio profiling tool and, working with a major financial institution, designed a financial planning mechanism to fund each adult child's continuing care. The agency recently was awarded a $250,000 grant by one of the world's premier charitable foundations to seed the program.

Critical Success Factors

Some authors have recently highlighted the criticality of a properly structured service-learning experience [26]. In the interest of identifying the key success factors of a potential project, we conducted a series of focus groups using the student and faculty participants from eleven projects completed at St. John's University from 1998-2001.

Findings with regard to important project, people, and process issues were extremely consistent across groups, even though the projects themselves were quite diverse in terms of industry type and lifecycle, stage of organizational development, and the specific business challenges to be addressed.

Key Project Issues

All parties agreed that not every project is a good candidate for advanced service-learning (see Exhibit 1). It is crucial for the supervis-

<table>
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<th>EXHIBIT 1: KEY PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS</th>
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<td>1. The project must encompass the course's knowledge base and learning objectives.</td>
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<td>2. The project must involve service to the community in a socially responsible manner.</td>
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<td>3. The project should challenge the students' technical and critical thinking skills as well as their creative ability.</td>
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<td>4. The project should be engaging. It should attract and sustain student interest during the introductory phase and the inevitable ups and downs that follow.</td>
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<td>5. The project should have noteworthy impact, i.e., it should have clear and substantive implications for the client organization.</td>
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<td>6. The project must be as narrowly described as possible while remaining meaningful.</td>
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<td>7. An organizing framework for the project must be obvious to the professor at a priori, even if it will be modified later.</td>
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<td>8. The client, professor, and student consultants must know what success looks like even before the project begins, i.e., they must know when the project's objectives have been achieved.</td>
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<td>9. A series of interim steps with associated deliverables should be identifiable as early as possible in the project's life.</td>
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<td>10. The project must be able to be completed, or a major milestone reached, within the academic period (usually a semester). Take it to the next level the following semester.</td>
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example, when our management students became involved with large projects with varied requirements, they successfully partnered with marketing classes to better understand specific market dynamics and better design targeted media campaigns, accounting classes to better perform detailed audits, and CIS classes to upgrade existing or install entirely new financial reporting and other systems. A service-learning project must be as narrowly described as possible while remaining meaningful. It must have an identifiable beginning and end, with clear boundaries as to scope. Loosely defined projects greatly increase the probability that someone eventually will be disappointed with the results. All parties must be clear with regard to what is being sought in the context of the engagement, with an equally clear understanding of what “success” looks like. A general approach to the project (optimally a comprehensive organizing analytic framework) should be obvious to the supervising faculty member beforehand, even if it will be modified later. Knowing how to proceed is key to getting the project “off the ground.” In perhaps our least well-defined project, in which the causes of organizational under-performance were almost entirely unknown, we were still able to identify several promising areas of investigation and a series of exploratory analyses to bring some order to the first steps in the change effort. Based on our preliminary findings, internal organizational pathologies and previously unrecognized market shifts were identified. In this regard, a practical series of interim objectives should be established as early as possible in the project’s life. We start by trying to understand the client organization—its people, systems, financial strength, and products and services, as well as its markets generally, and competitors, suppliers, buyers, and other stakeholders, specifically.

The project should have noteworthy impact. It should have clear and substantive implications for the client organization. It should be energizing. It must attract and sustain student interest during the introductory phase and the inevitable ups and downs that follow. A project seen as being of marginal value to the client will ultimately generate marginal effort by the students. After all, when things get tough, and they will, “why bother?” An advanced service-learning project may be the students’ first encounter with the ambiguity characteristic of the world of business, and they may find it frustrating, at times perhaps even discouraging. Knowing that others (e.g., the client, their colleagues, the professor, and in some ways even their college or university) are depending on them, and that the project is important, is crucial to continued effort. The assignment should challenge the students’ creative abilities, causing them to think “outside the box” and across the functional silos emphasized in much business education and practice. Thinking along functional lines is necessary early in any business education and in most entry-level positions. However, those aspiring to senior management, investment banking, management consulting or related practice—especially involving the type of entrepreneurial and organizational turn-around work in which we have engaged—must be able to think integratively. Seeing varied internal as well as external organizational interdependencies has been key to the successful completion of many of our service-learning projects. Finally, the project must be able to be completed within the academic period, usually a semester. Although we have now engaged in several longer-term projects, each had clear end-of-the-semester deliverables.

Key People Issues

Real-world business challenges are inherently difficult. Were they simple, there would be little call for technical excellence or managerial expertise of any type. Service-learning projects on a scale and of a nature similar to those advocated in this article are usually just as problematic, perhaps more so, as they often involve issues the client organization was unable to meet with its own human,
financial, and other resources. Because of this, the advanced service-learning experience is not for everyone (see Exhibit 2).

**Student Qualifications.** Student participants must be able, if not anxious, to address the uncertainty of a difficult project. Anyone seeking a well-ordered, highly structured assignment will be sorely disappointed. Participants must have maturity, good judgment, and a willingness to negotiate, to subordinate individual interests to group achievement, and to “go the extra mile” to get the job done. Group- and client-centered work often involves compromise, and one must be prepared to put aside his or her personal agenda in the interest of advancing the project. Overarching objectives must be agreed to, necessary analytic activities identified, assignments made and accepted, and work completed on time. Findings must be integrated into a carefully crafted and internally consistent action plan to which all members subscribe, or at least around which a consensus is developed— a process involving a good deal of give and take as competing approaches are evaluated and winnowed. Participants must have superior technical, interpersonal, and communication skills, and they should be creative thinkers as well as critical thinkers. Moreover, they should be individuals with a sense of propriety in dealing with confidential organizational and/or personal information. Finally and importantly, the student consultants must have a desire to serve while learning.

**Client Qualifications.** On the client side, too, there must be a sense of the importance of the project, as well as an unquestioned commitment to its success. Clients are asked to make a real effort to help complete the project. Requests for information as well as for raw data come fast and furious, especially early in the process. Thus, the client should have a sense of urgency regarding progress, and a willingness to follow up with the service-learning consultants. He or she should also have the technical ability or at least the capacity to grasp sometimes complex analyses, and the cognitive flexibility to appreciate innovative solutions to difficult problems. We have recently expanded the service-learning experience to include a degree of client education. It would be difficult for some of our clients to fully understand, for instance, detailed financial analysis, without some related instruction. Therefore, we take the time to explain the basics of income statements, balance sheets, and cash flow statements, if we determine the results of these analyses to be necessary to carry out our recommendations. Our objective in doing this is to enable the client to become an educated consumer, in this illustrative example, of financial data, knowledgeable of some fundamental analytic techniques, and appreciative of the derivative findings. Finally, the client must have the ability to appreciate, if not entirely welcome, the constructive criticism of past practices and their subsequent modification.

**Faculty Qualifications.** Just as the new service-learning experience is not for every student or every possible client, neither is it appropriate for every faculty member. The supervising professor must have a high level of commitment to service-learning generally, and to the immediate project in particular. He or she must have the conceptual skills necessary to organize a complex project, the technical skills to advise the student consultants on a wide variety of issues spanning functional specialties, and the managerial

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**EXHIBIT 3: KEY PROCESS ISSUES**

**General:**
1. Project approval by school prior to launch.
3. Volunteer student participation. (Caveat: do not commit to a client project without student interest.)
4. Realistic job preview. Students must be told that the positives and negatives of participating in a service-learning project before joining a consulting team.
5. Realistic job preview. Client must be told the positives and negatives of participating in a service-learning project before engaging in the consulting team.
6. If a project is oversubscribed, develop an obviously fair system for selecting the team.
7. Identify contact person at the client organization to answer or find answers to questions — to keep client from being overwhelmed with possibly uncoordinated requests for information or feedback.
8. Release time for the students. Consultants may be excused from certain classes to meet with their client or teammates, and may also be excused from selected class assignments.
9. Keep it simple! The project will get more complicated than you think.
10. Getting going early! The project will take longer than you think.

**Professor’s Role:**
1. Involvement with the community to identify prospective engagements.
2. Careful screening of possible projects.
3. Unchanged teaching responsibilities. The course must continue as if it otherwise would for others in the class.
4. Viability vis-à-vis the project, i.e., the professor must be, and must be seen to be, an interested advocate.
5. Emphasis on deadlines/deliverables.
6. Project tracking. Professor must remain actively involved with the student consultants.
7. Motivator — especially of clients with limited project experience, and particularly when things do not go as planned.
8. Expediter. A phone call from the professor to a reluctant client or third party sometimes makes all the difference.

**Meetings:**
1. Project definition meetings between professor and prospective client.
2. Structured questionnaire and follow-up meeting to help define client need:
   - Organizational mission
   - Objectives and project scope
   - Resources required (human, financial, etc.)
   - Organizational resources available
   - Timing
   - Metrics (how will success be measured)
   - Manage client expectations.
3. Students should be given a general overview of the service-learning project as early as possible in the semester.
4. Prospective consultants should be given the written proposal agreed to by the client and supervising faculty member, as well as any available summary background information on the subject organization.
5. Introductory meeting at which the client and professor are introduced to the class.
6. Volunteers for the team selected approximately one week following introductory session.
7. Weekly updates by the students to the professor.
8. Biweekly updates by the consultants to others in the class. Positive and constructively critical feedback encouraged.
9. Interim report to client to gain additional buy-in and reaffirm or reset expectations.
10. Dress rehearsal of final presentation.
11. Presentation to the client of the completed project — done with classmates in attendance.
12. Follow-up meeting of professor and client. Debriefing of the clients.

**Parameters for Team Evaluation:**
1. Was the overarching objective of the project achieved?
2. If not, was the failure understandable?
3. Was the client satisfied? (Have client be a contributor to the final grade.)
4. Was the team resourceful?
5. Was the team creative?
6. Did the consulting team have a sense of urgency? Did they "owe it their all"?
7. Did the students work together? (Have students evaluate themselves and one another)
8. Did the final report approximate professional standards?
9. Was the final presentation professionally adequate?
skills to guide the project, interface with the client in support of the students, with the students in support of the client, and sometimes intervene to keep the team itself functioning smoothly and effectively. Conflict is an almost inevitable part of working together [35]. When collaborators on a service-learning team reflect the diversity of a contemporary college or university campus, there are likely to be differing needs, decision-making styles, and perspectives as to how best to proceed. The objective is to fully leverage this heterogeneity, and what has been termed the “value-in-diversity hypothesis” [9], while avoiding its possible risks [1]. We have found it a good idea to start the semester with some simple team-building exercises to minimize the possibility of later difficulty. If members do find themselves at odds, a gripe session with the professor as facilitator has always worked well for us. While any number of conflict resolution strategies are available [12,24], giving everyone a voice and analyzing topics of potential disagreement has invariably resulted in a successful regrouping, recommitment, and redoubled effort to all pull in the same direction.

The faculty supervisor must be willing to relinquish a good measure of control to the consulting team, and at the same time be able to motivate participants through the inevitable ebb and flow of emotion. He or she must also have what it takes to see the multifaceted and sometimes exasperating project through to completion. It is also worth remembering that the professor who integrates service-learning into a course must continue to teach that course. There will be a good deal of the course’s required content that is not covered by the service-learning experience. Moreover, the supervising faculty member has a clear and unchanged obligation to those students who elect not to participate, and service-learning must be a voluntary activity. This is not only our opinion; it has been indicated by the focus groups’ findings.

Service-learning requires additional time, effort, patience, and sometimes the assumption of risk on the part of the professor. The faculty member must be able to tolerate—personally and professionally—the possible failure of the consulting team’s work to meet his or her expectations or those of the subject organization, and to address the client’s disappointment. Conversely, the client may fail to meet their obligations to the team, and the professor must be able to address the students’ frustration. Just as not every project is a good fit with the new service-learning model generally, and just as not every student wants or is prepared to participate, advanced service-learning is not for every professor, cognitively, affectively, or professionally.

Key Process Issues

Clearly, any faculty member who elects to incorporate the type of service-learning introduced here into his or her classroom is also adding a degree of uncertainty and complexity not present with more traditional instructional formats. However, some procedures can increase the probability of success. There are techniques to clarify the dimension of the project, to recruit and select student volunteers, to track progress, to make needed adjustments, and to optimize outcomes (see Exhibit 3).

Before accepting any service-learning consulting assignment, the professor and prospective client should have a short series of project definition meetings to discuss the broad parameters of the engagement, narrow the scope to an appropriate size and ultimately agree to a specified goal. To help those unfamiliar with the use of external consultants, it is often useful to provide them with a structured questionnaire, which should be completed in writing. The questionnaire helps clients consider more fully several variables: issues of organizational mission, objectives, alternative approaches to achieving those objectives, timing, and requisite resource requirements and availability. It also helps screen clients who, for one reason or another, are unable or unwilling to dedicate necessary time, effort, and thought to the project. The supervising faculty member should try to understand the level of a prospective client’s enthusiasm before committing to an engagement. Once a project is underway, any loss of client interest may devastate the students. Thus, having the client complete the question-naire, which is a relatively modest assignment, is one tool for assessing that interest in advance. These initial meetings are also a good opportunity for the professor to manage client expectations – the service-learning “consultants” are, after all, still students, even though many, if not all, may have some substantial work experience.

Once the parameters of the project are established, the faculty supervisor should seek any approvals required explicitly or otherwise by the college or university prior to launch. In most cases this is a mere formality. However, some projects may require affiliations containing hidden conflicts of which the professor is unaware, or partnerships or goals that may be ideologically problematic to some in the administration. Once institutional approval is secured and a decision is made to proceed, students should be given a general overview of the realities of service-learning. This introduction should include a “realistic job preview.” Students must be told the positives and negatives of participation in a service-learning exercise. On the plus side, they will have the opportunity to learn by doing, to work as a team, to interface with an actual client, and to make a difference. However, that must be weighed against the need to put in more hours, the usual frustrations of being part of a team, the vagaries of having to please a real client, and even the possible failure of the project. This will allow them to make an informed choice in considering whether to volunteer for a consulting team and assuming all of the responsibilities that that decision carries. Subsequently, the specific project under consideration should be described to the class in some detail, and the client introduced to further discuss the engagement. This gives the students an opportunity to better understand the proposed project, the subject organization, and to establish a degree of familiarity with their possible client. We then invite students from previous semesters’ projects to give their views of the experience as they lived it. After that, we recommend that the faculty member and client excuse themselves from the room, to encourage the students to discuss the project candidly among themselves.
Because our findings and experience indicate that participation must be voluntary, the supervising faculty member should not commit to a project before assessing student interest. We have had an instance in which with the very occasional and even more limited assistance of the professor, evaluates the candidates and selects the team.

Once the team is assembled and work begins, the students update the supervising faculty member weekly about their progress, and discuss the next steps. We also recommend bimonthly updates by the consultants to the class. The class should be encouraged to question the project team in detail, to critically evaluate progress and plans, suggest alternative approaches, and generally act to "stress test" the team's work. All of this must be done in an atmosphere of collegiality and professionalism. Differing perspectives often open tremendous possibilities not previously explored by the team, and may prove extremely helpful in breaking through the "mind-guarding" that so easily overtakes group dynamics, compromising open debate and restricting the alternatives considered [20]. It also keeps the rest of the class involved in the project, and legitimately gives them some sense of ownership of the results. We have never had an instance in which the feedback was not well received. There is great insight in a class of graduate or upper-level undergraduate students. Use it. In addition, many students have extensive networks of personal and professional contacts that they are more than willing to share. Our projects have benefited greatly from the business and political relationships of others in the class. It is in these sessions, however, that the professor may come to realize that service-learning is an educational experience not only for the students. During this free exchange of ideas, in which the professor is a full participant, he or she must be willing to occasionally be shown to be wrong, and shown to be wrong in front of the entire class! Our strong opinion is that once the professor's credibility is established with the class, acknowledging previously unexamined perspectives, or simple miscues, may be a humanizing experience appreciated by the students. The professor should welcome and encourage this continuation of his or her education. There can be a downside to this dynamic, however, if the supervising faculty member gets defensive. The students will reject the professor's closed mind as surely as the professor would reject theirs.

Upon completion of the project, representatives of the client organization are invited back to campus for a formal presentation of the final work product. This presentation is made with the class in attendance and the full knowledge that, to some extent, the team's, professor's, and college or university's reputations are all at stake. It should be taken very seriously. Focus group participants recommended that the supervising faculty member require and evaluate a formal dress rehearsal approximately one-week prior to the presentation. Students apparently prefer to divide any complex project into discrete segments that only come together at the end of the semester. While this is understandable and perhaps even necessary early in the project's life, it should be discouraged at all other times, because everyone needs to see how all facets are integrated with one another. It should also be avoided as the presentation is being crafted. The risk is that without a rehearsal or two, students are likely to repeat background information, descriptions of analytic techniques or findings, have awkward segues interrupt the flow of ideas, or just simply contradict one another, calling into question the efficacy of the entire semester's work. The students have likely dedicated hundreds if not thousands of hours to their project. Encourage them to spend a few more honing their presentation. Volunteer to help with this; they will appreciate your advice as they will want others to see their work in its best possible light, and students often have limited presentation experience themselves.

Grading a service-learning assignment requires that the professor, as always, distance him- or herself from the emotion of the moment and the personal relationships that may develop during the life of the project. It is always tempting to reward a project
team's success by giving all members high grades. It is just as tempting to hold all of the students responsible for an incomplete or disappointing result. As with many temptations, these are to be scrupulously avoided. The success or failure of an advanced, real-world service-learning engagement is usually multiply determined, and the evaluator must be careful to consider key elements in the project environment to fully appreciate their relative contributions. We have developed a series of general questions that we ask ourselves at the conclusion of each project. First, was the overarching objective of the engagement achieved? Was the team resourceful? Creative? Did the students work together to achieve success? Did they have a sense of urgency? Did they "give it their all"? Did the final work product approximate professional standards? If the work product was not professionally adequate, was the failure understandable? Were there exogenous factors (e.g., a client reluctant to release data, a client leaving the subject organization – we had one project that involved three senior management reorganizations in a single semester – or a client becoming ill or otherwise unable to cooperate in the project) that compromised the results? In our view, it is completely possible to give high grades to a group that did not entirely achieve its initial objectives. We can only ask students to be excellent. Sometimes external forces intervene to simply foreclose success, as occurred when one of our service-learning clients in Africa, who happened to be an elected government official, became distracted from the project by his electioneering. In the overwhelming number of instances in which the client was a full partner, we bring him or her into the grading process. What was their view of the students' effort? Were they satisfied with the final work product? Why or why not? We always suggest that the supervising faculty member keep standards high. Our experience is that a professor's modest standards result in the students' modest enthusiasm for the hard work requisite of an integrative assignment. Set the bar high, and at every opportunity encourage the participant-volunteers that they can clear it. Finally, we require the students to grade one another. We evaluate the entire team's work, and they determine where around that average each member's grade gets distributed. They do this individually and anonymously, and we average the results to generate final grades. The students appear to take this responsibility very seriously, rewarding their leaders, and appropriately penalizing free-riders.

Final Comments
Two final bits of advice to those considering the new service-learning as a pedagogical enhancement: keep it simple, and get going early.

As with most real-world business challenges, these service-learning projects tend to get complicated all by themselves. As investigators drill down, it often becomes very obvious why the client organization either never addressed the issues being explored, or failed to develop adequate responses. And those reasons rarely lend themselves to quick and easy solutions. Competitor initiatives, the introduction of substitute products or services, rapidly shifting market requirements, unpredictable regulatory changes, limited resource availability, and the loss of key personnel challenge the not-for-profit manager as surely as they do those in the for-profit sector. In fact, it has been our experience that the rapidity of political and other change often results in highly volatile markets for some not-for-profits' goods and services. Just as in the for-profit world, these organizations either competently adjust to these environmental forces or quickly become irrelevant.

Finally, service-learning projects similar to those advocated in this article often take longer than expected. Subtleties not identifiable earlier, a client reluctant to share professionally and sometimes personally sensitive information, a key player in the subject firm being distracted by other organization-

Our students regularly report dedicating 20-40 hours per week to service-learning, with some reporting an astonishing 100 hours per week on occasion.
References


