A Service Learning Model for Management Students

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ABSTRACT

This article is an action research inquiry into the progress of business undergraduate students through the process of developing experiential service projects for the campus and for regional non-profit and profit businesses. Bloom's taxonomy is a foundation component of this process. Analysis of a survey of students demonstrates the efficacy of such a hands-on learning endeavor. There is little written to date about the use of this pedagogy for management students in particular. Therefore, this study aims to partially fill a knowledge gap in the field.

INTRODUCTION

Business higher education continues to seek the optimal model for preparing future leaders. In this paper, students developed HR-related service projects for local organizations, including for segments of their own university's student body, for local non-profit businesses, and for-profit firms. Therefore, the projects discussed in this paper are not only experiential but they are also examples of service learning. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) define service learning as a ''type of experiential education in which students participate in service in the community and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content and of the discipline'' (p.1). All of these criteria were fulfilled through the projects discussed in this paper. Once community needs were determined, specific location assignments were given. As discussed below, once the projects were completed, students reflected upon their academic growth and their views toward implementing their learning outside of the classroom. This endeavor, therefore, also fulfilled Forman and Wilkinson's (1997) definition of service learning as "a pedagogy that fosters the development of skills and knowledge needed for participation in public life" (p. 278). This was an effective outcome of the assignment. Butin (2003) notes that this is a form of "scholarship of engagement" (p. 1). As noted below, the students studied in this article reported positively upon the level of involvement and challenge that they experienced. Their engagement in the project directly influenced its success.

The literature supports the efficacy of experiential learning for university students (Augier and March, 2007; Wingfield and Black, 2005; Young, C., Shinnar, Ackerman, Carruthers, and Young, D., 2007). Andrews (2007) observes that "Management also has a variety of recent SL [service learning] applications. Experiential learning appears to support achievement of management learning objectives. Angelidis, Tomic, and Ibrahim (2004) reported on the use of SL to provide experience in preparing a strategic analysis for a community business or organization. Madsen and Turnbull (2006) illustrated an SL application in a compensation and

benefits course…Management also has a variety of recent SL applications. Experiential learning appears to support achievement of management learning objectives" (p. 23). However, there is relatively little material that discusses the use of experiential (Madsen, 2004) learning, including service-oriented formats for management students in particular.

The benefits of business higher education service learning are relevant to this study. For example, there has been a linkage established between self-efficacy and subsequent performance. "When self-efficacy is high, individuals will engage in tasks that foster the development of their skills and capabilities." Additionally, it has been recommended that "all business schools require field experiences to make the programs more relevant for their students" (McCarthy and McCarthy, 2006, p.202, 204). "By combining formal study of a traditional discipline with substantive community service, the student's learning process is enhanced…As a teaching and learning method, service learning adds an active, exploratory dimension to the classroom" (Rudell, 1996). The applicability of this hands-on assignment is because business' "subject can be applied to all types of organizations regardless of whether they are for-profit or not" (Angelidis, Tomic, Ibrahim, 2004, p. 32).

BLOOMS TAXONOMY

Warren (1992) states that "integration is…defined as the formal and/or informal linking of …. conceptual parts that are usually taught in isolation." Warren poses that informal linkages are needed to interrelate previously isolated conceptual parts. This requires "intellectual leaps of creative thinking not attained with the rote memorization that occurs when students are required to study isolated concepts or work with formal linkages. By logical extension, integration calls forth holism….Holism contends that, though more difficult to measure, the recognition of the structure, its patterns, its conceptual nature, and workings of the conceptual parts are premises to understanding and discovery" (p. 21,22). This paper discusses the incorporation of this holistic pedagogy to facilitate students' development of realistic human resource management projects.

This approach required an understanding by students that they would develop higher-level thinking skills in conjunction with Blooms Taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl, 1956). Students were instructed in the taxonomy and how each level is manifested. Students were challenged that the completion of their hands-on, "outreach" projects would utilize, at least, the top 3rd and 4th level of the model.

DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT AND SETTING: THE RELEVANT MANAGEMENT PEDAGOGY

The courses studied here implement project-based pedagogy in a service-oriented setting. When deciding whether to conduct service learning projects, the professor needs to determine if this endeavor matches the learning outcomes of the university. In this case, the university in which these projects occur has established pedagogical goals that include "demonstrate leadership, negotiation, relational, and consensus skills; propose new solutions to current issues; find evaluate, and apply information; integrate the practice of charity with justice." The service learning projects fulfill these outcomes.

Many students see the value of taking responsibility for their learning through practical, real-life experiential projects (Razzouk, Seitz, and Rizkallah, 2003). Students complete several off-campus projects through their Business major coursework, the Society for Human Resource

Management and the American Marketing Association collegiate chapters, and a general Business Club. These experiences mirror the commitment they see in some of their business coursework.

In-class service learning creates challenges for the professor. These typically include finding a sufficient number of beneficial assignments. Contacts were made throughout the community by soliciting relevant projects. Projects included on-campus and off-campus experiences. Topics were challenging since the courses' student body were at the sophomore level, at the least. Therefore, they were prepared to implement their management knowledge in a realistic application. Projects included marketing plans for regional organizations, interviewing techniques for first-time career seekers, development of a marketing campaign to recruit volunteers for a non-profit organization, development of an interviewers' procedure manual for a non-profit entity, employee procedure manual, and presentation of "How to Interview" training sessions for banking and utility businesses. The latter included first, an elementary training program for an organization with an existing fundamental training session for line managers, and second, a mid-level sophisticated session for business unit managers who already experienced a formalized training program. In prior years, the projects have also included development of a performance appraisal form and procedures for non-profit organizations. All of these endeavors are conducted with a service paradigm. "SL [service learning] has increased because it provides desired academic and personal outcomes…[These endeavors] can create stronger ties between school and community and provide students with experiential learning and an opportunity to exercise new skills" (Andrews, p.25).

PROCESS

In general the process involves:
• Professor commitment to this pedagogical method
• Community needs
• Establishment of project assignment in courses
• Establishment of project teams
• Determination of project team leader
• Development of project, including with off-site supervisor
• Report on final outcome.

In HR courses, the service learning was fulfilled in several phases. The students were assigned to the projects during the first week of the course. The in-class process began with the professor soliciting ideas and volunteers for various topics. Based upon this list, the professor assigned students to each of the experiential projects. The composition of the teams was based upon the students' self-reported interest, the professor's knowledge of students' abilities, and matching their academic skill sets to those needed to compose an effective team. Hansen (2006) and Stanier (1997) support team projects as learning enhancement tools.

One student was designated as the "liaison" for each team. In this capacity, that individual's responsibility was to be the main communication link between the student team, the professor, and "outside" managers and organizational leaders. Progress, project achievements and any potential problems were reported. Additionally, students completed two individual, informal "Progress Check" reports stating their accomplishments and barriers encountered. After the initial contact with the off-campus organizational leaders, the professor had minimal

communication with those individuals. The students were accountable for the project flow and completion. This facilitated maximum benefits from the experience.

In Marketing coursework, the project used the major components of the marketing plan as a tool to engage marketing students enrolled in an Advanced Marketing Seminar. Students were organized into teams based upon their varying skill sets as determined by their performance in former business courses. Therefore, "while groups are just assembled, *teams are constructed and managed*. With teams and a team learning approach, the processes and skill sets needed for 'teaming,' 'team building' and 'learning to work together' are as much part of the curriculum as the deliverables linked to the course assignment " (Brunel, Hibbard, 2006, p. 15). Each team was assigned an external group or organization as their theme for the plan assignment.

The team of students that are the focus of this paper were charged with analyzing their university's internal marketing endeavors for the liberal arts curriculum. The university's internal stakeholders were identified as a first step. The students determined that, for their purposes, the group included faculty and students. It is interesting that the students included themselves since, as noted by Clayson and Haley (2005), "many in education have begun to adopt the customer model" so much that marketing promotions by universities to students are almost identical to marketing promotions in any customer service environment (p.1). To further understand the views of the student population, the student research team coordinated with faculty members to receive primary data about the liberal arts curriculum from first-year students and received secondary data from other university constituents.

As Wingfield and Black (2005) note, "experiential educators are generally aware that….experiences have to be relevant to the learning goals and then the learners must have time and opportunity to reflect on the experience" (p. 119). Near the conclusion of the 16-week Human Resource Management coursework, students completed individual reflection papers summarizing the project, answering five questions, and synthesizing course content with their analysis of the project's results. In this way, the benefits of experiential service education were assessed since "experiential knowledge is derived from practical experience in the field…Its hallmark is direct and immediate relevance to practice" (Augier and March, 2007, p. 129, 130). According to Kolb (1984, cited in Young, 2002; Kayes, Kayes, and Kolb, 2005) the concrete experience leads to reflective observation that facilitates abstract conceptualization of concepts and principles inherent in curriculum. Andrews (2007) concurs when stating that "conceptual SL [service learning] researchers in business addressed the same issues found in SL in general, emphasizing the opportunity to (a) put business skills into practice, (b) strengthen ties with the community, and (c) capitalize on experiential education" (p.22).

The professor analyzed the five-part, closed questions that were submitted as part of the closing reflection process. One question utilized a branch approach. The investigative questions were the following. (1) My professional confidence in the subject was enhanced. (2) This was a useful way to apply subject matter outside of the classroom. (3) This was a challenging assignment. (4) This was similar to assignments I have completed in other courses. (5) This was a way to build my team work skills. Descriptive statistics were utilized to review the student results. Through this instrument, the professor wanted to assess if these projects "sharpened the students' skills in applying academic knowledge to a practical 'real world' setting" (Angelidis, Tomic, Ibrahim, 2004, p.32) and if the projects "provided students with skills necessary to function effectively in a business environment" (Elkins, 2002, p. 40). Additionally, the reflection procedure captured the students' perceptions of the difficulty of the assignment. Given the need for relevant learning experiences in human resource management education (Elkins), the

professor also wanted to ascertain the degree to which other courses offered such pedagogical experiences.

FINDINGS AND PROJECT OUTCOMES

Specifically, the researcher asked students to comment upon their perceptions of the process and the learning benefits gained through the projects. The courses studied included the capstone Marketing Management course and Human Resource Management under class and upper class courses.

Demonstration of higher-level management knowledge

Since segments of this project were completed in the Marketing Seminar, it required the students to be able to implement upper-level marketing concepts in a project that would immediately be used by external stakeholders. Specifically, the outcomes on the course syllabus included the following. "(1) The student will apply the marketing's major aspects and develop implementation skills for applying these concepts. (2)The students will develop skills in analyzing situations, and designing and articulating marketing strategies. (3)The students will apply marketing techniques to current business situations." All of these outcomes were realized through the marketing plan assignment.

Additionally, students evaluated the course at the conclusion of the semester. The course received favorable responses. Below is a correlation developed between standard student evaluative questions and the main experiential learning objectives of the project.

1. For the question "demonstrated the importance and significance of the subject matter" the average rating was 4.8, with 100% of the students rating it a 4 or 5.
2. The questions that gauged students' involvement were rated very high, including if the students were involved in hands-on projects, if assignments required creative thinking, if assignments encouraged students to use multiple resources to improve understanding, and if the assignments related course material to real-life situations. The students also rated very high the fact that the assignments covered the most important points of the course.
3. The students rated very high that the professor involved students in hands-on projects; that students were stimulated to intellectual effort more than that required by most courses; and that the instructor ensured the course material related to realistic situations.

As Cooper and Schindler (2003) observe, summarizing information from collected data often requires the description of "typical" values. Therefore, descriptive statistics were also utilized to further analyze the results of the HR project as a service learning tool. The following describes those results. In reviewing the students' overall perceptions of the experience, the vast majority of the HR students found that the service learning projects were challenging, relevant avenues for implementing their subject matter knowledge. As Table 1 depicts, although the assignment was dissimilar to other homework given in other courses, the students believed that their professional confidence was enhanced.

Table 1
Student Post-Project Comments

Category	Most frequent responses	Number	Percent
Q1 My professional confidence in the subject was enhanced.	Yes	32	94%
Q2 This was a useful way to apply subject matter outside the classroom.	Yes	33	97%
Q3 This was a challenging assignment.	Yes	30	91%
Q4 This was similar to assignments I have completed in other courses.	No	33	97%
Q5 This was a way to build my team work skills.	Yes	28	93 %

In further analyzing the results of the students' remarks, the response to Question 2, "This was a useful way to apply subject matter outside of the classroom" the mean and the median of answers were very significant. (See Table 2 below for statistical significance.) Therefore, the students strongly concurred that the application level of Blooms Taxonomy was fulfilled through this assignment.

Table 2
Question 2

Descriptive Statistical Test	Value
Mean (F)	512***
Median (KW)	44.52174***

Significance: *p≤0.05; **p≤0.001, ***p≤0.0001

Achievement through a challenging, new approach

The responses for Question 3, "This was a challenging assignment" indicated that the mean and the median were very statistically significant. The variance of responses was also significant. Therefore, the students were very favorable that the project offered learning challenges.

Table 3
Question 3

Descriptive Statistical Test	Value
Mean (F)	141.3913***
Median (Med Chi-Square)	73.90909***
Variance (Bartlett)	8.088948 *

Significance: *p≤0.05; **p≤0.001, ***p≤0.0001

In analyzing Question 4, "This was similar to assignments I have completed in other courses," the mean and the median of responses were very significant. The variation of comments was significant. Therefore, the learners believed that this assignment was not similar to other courses' homework. This provided learning and administrative challenges because the students' paradigm of what constituted a project had to be changed to include service, experiential activities.

Table 4 Question 4	
Descriptive Statistical Test	Value
Mean (F)	252.0692***
Median (Med Chi-Square)	85.25758***
Variance (Bartlett)	8.088948 *

Significance: *p≤0.05; **p≤0.001, ***p≤0.0001

Teamwork

Renesis Likert has stated that "the greater the loyalty of a group toward the group, the greater is the motivation among the members to achieve the goals of the group, and the greater the probability that the group will achieve its goals" (cited in Aguinis, 2009, p. 268).By analyzing Question 5, "This was a way to build my team work skills," descriptive statistics indicated that this was a useful way to apply subject matter outside the classroom. Although the variance of responses was not significant, the mean and the median were very significant. Most of the students strongly perceived that their team work skills had been built through the group component of this service experience.

Table 5 Question 5	
Descriptive Statistical Test	Value
Mean (F)	175.0357***
Median (KW)	33.2459 ***

Significance: *p≤0.05; **p≤0.001, ***p≤0.0001

Developmentally, the professor who guided this project plans to concentrate more on enhancing the teamwork skills of students. "By necessity, business students need exposure to the skills and experiences of working in teams" (Stone, Bailey, 2007, p.258). It has been noted that the "common frustrations with teamwork include dealing with procrastinators, dealing with 'free riders,' dealing with ineffective team leadership, dealing with students wanting total control, and mediating conflict between team members" (McConnell, Sasse, 99, p. 41). Particularly in the Marketing coursework element of this business service learning discussion, and possibly due to the intensive nature of the project, several of these situations have been encountered over the years. If conflict within a team arises, the professor instructs the liaison to try to resolve the difficulty through an inter-group meeting. This leads to follow-up action plans or meeting reports that are emailed to all members of the group and to the professor. The inclusion of the professor alerts the "slackers" or procrastinators that their work is being monitored and can affect their final grade. Since, in this most recent earning experience, the project constituted 40% of the grade, there was considerable accountability for the results.

The team criteria should also include conflict resolution, collaborative problem solving, communication, goal setting and performance management, planning and task collaboration (Chen, Donahue, Klimonski, 2004, p. 28). A team building lecture presentation was developed for one of the Marketing class offerings and delivered near the conclusion of the semester before the final product was delivered to the outside organizations. Students commented that the

information clarified the group dynamics that were occurring among the teams. To improve the students' team self-efficacy in the future, this presentation will be delivered early in the term.

Professional Preparation

The students in these experiences are members of the Millennial Generation. They have been criticized in employee surveys for a lack of professionalism. The students surveyed for these projects overwhelmingly agreed that the project increased their perceived confidence in the field, their knowledge of human resource management, and that the endeavor was conducted in a challenging manner. Subsequent to the submission of the student reflection papers, the professor conducted informal interviews of the managers at the organizations where the outreach projects were conducted. Overall, the managers rated the students very positively and described the advantages of the students' professional preparation including practical, realistic projects. The off-site managers also repeatedly stated "appreciation" for the completion of worthwhile assignments that their organizations may not have been able to complete otherwise due to limited staff numbers and time. One non-profit site supervisor noted that the students conducted research about their industry throughout their project and that the agency would be able to utilize that information. Additionally, she felt that the students' different, "outside" perspective of the organization enhanced the final results. The professionalism of the students was complimented by a number of site managers. Another non-profit leader remarked that the students' exposure to real-life projects facilitated a smoother transition for them into management positions.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

The professor who conducts these projects believes in the overall benefits of the experiences. Realistically, though, there are potential negative situations that can result. For example, occasionally a team leader has not been an effective manager of the team. In these cases, the instructor has met with that person, the team, and investigated the barriers. A strategy to rectify the situation was then been resolved with the group. Typically, the leader needs to delegate more to the team members. A couple times a co-leader needed to be chosen (by the professor or the team) to fill the leadership gaps of the original liaison.
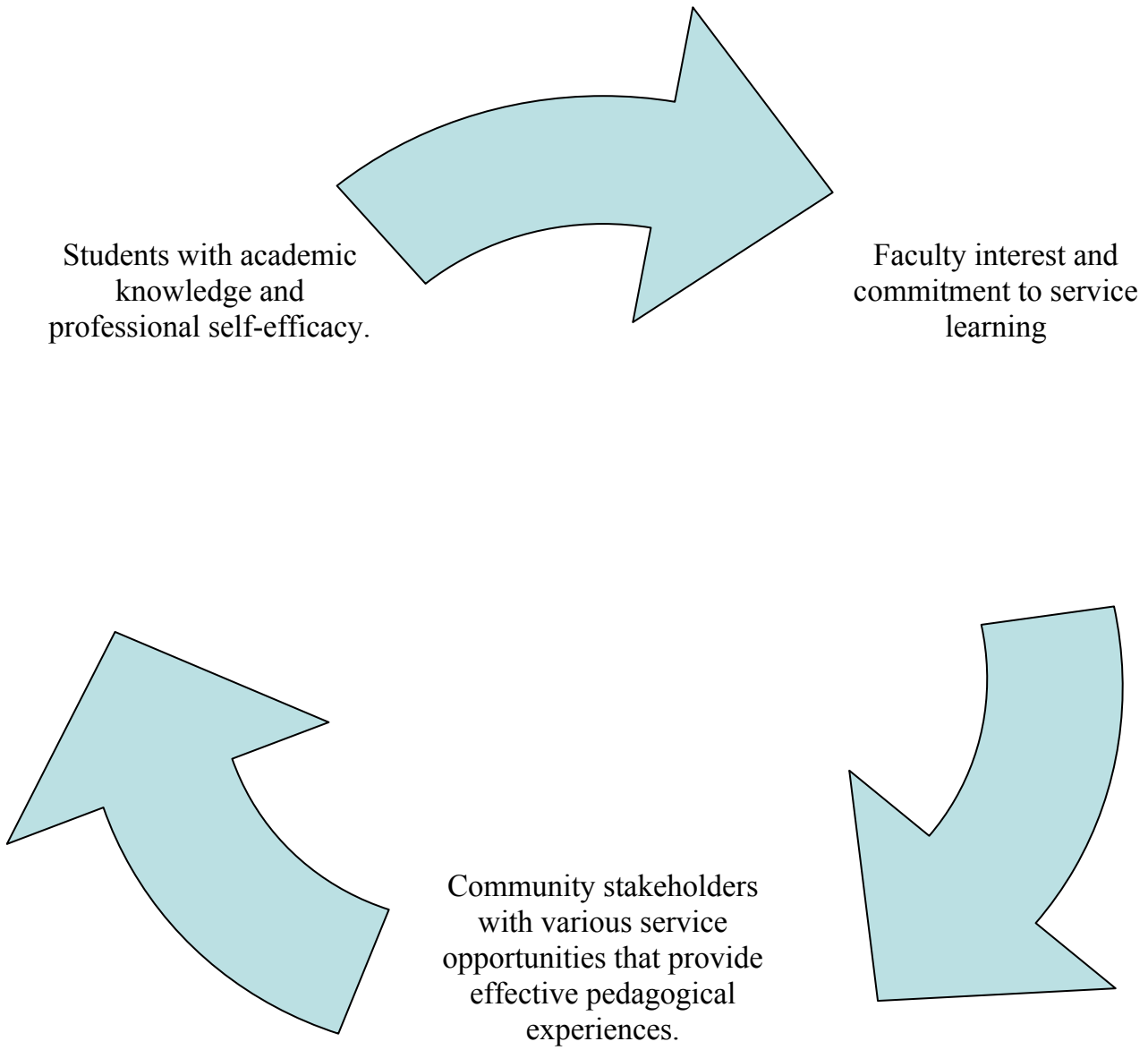
The time commitment of the projects has occasionally been projected inaccurately and the students were spending more time than planned. In those cases, the number of teammates in a group has been realigned to balance the time required. Also, if the time commitment affects the entire class, the professor has discussed a re-design of the grade calculation. For example, if the project would have been 20% of the grade, the professor shifts the project to 25% of the grade. In order to maintain consistency, however, the professor calculates the final grades using both the original and the revised grading recalculation. Whichever is higher, per student, results in the final grade earned. In this way, a student cannot question the legitimacy of the original grading scale posted on the syllabus.

KEY SUCCESS VARIABLES

Although every situation will differ due to varying group dynamics, student preparedness, and university curriculum, it appears that certain elements enhance the success of business service learning projects. First, the guiding faculty member must be committed to the risk-taking and time commitment inherent in such endeavors. Secondly, the external community

must have a relevant need, a site supervisor willing to assist and mentor students through the project, and a belief that students are capable of successfully fulfilling such projects. Third, students need to be knowledgeable of the subject content in order to achieve the projects' goals. The students need to demonstrate self-initiation, time management, and team cohesiveness. The following depicts the interrelationship of these elements.
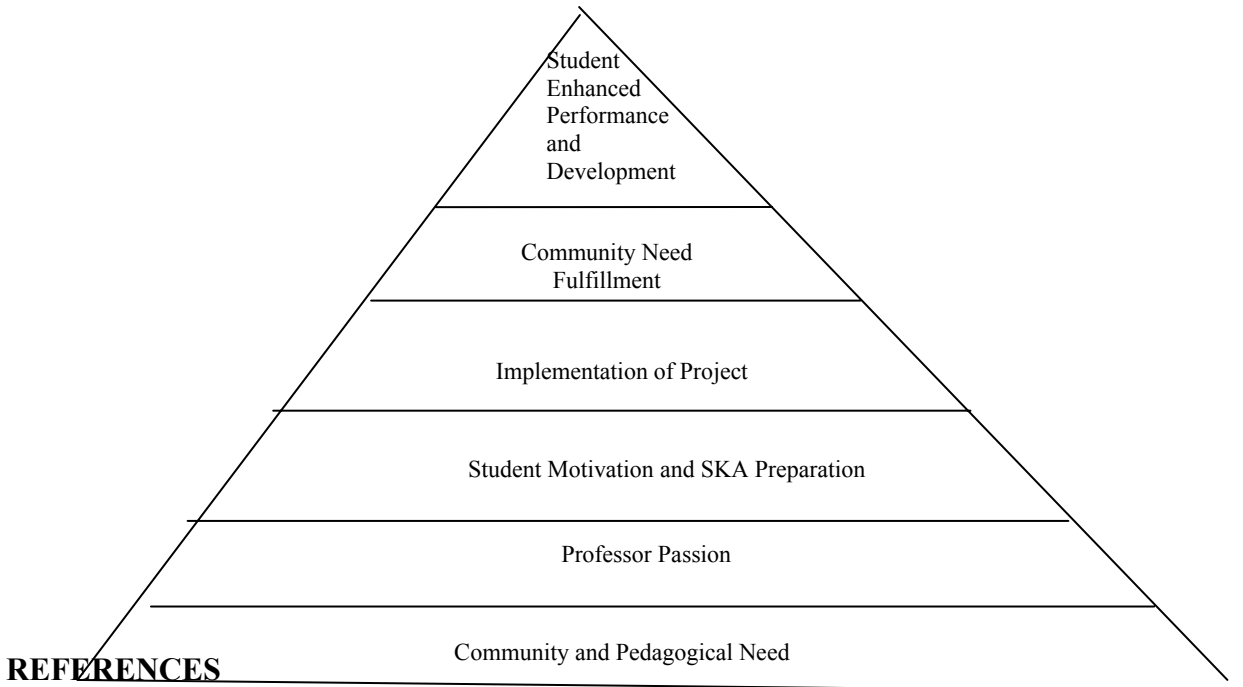
Table 6: Key Success Factors

Students with academic knowledge and professional self-efficacy.

Faculty interest and commitment to service learning

Community stakeholders with various service opportunities that provide effective pedagogical experiences.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The use of hands-on, out-of-the-classroom service experiences offers exceptional learning tools for management students. "If actionable knowledge is to be created, academics must make it happen…Learning how to translate concepts into their applications in practice may take some faculty members out of the comfort zones" (Blood, 2006, p. 212). Although this can be a challenge for the professor, as well as for the students, the advantage of students directly seeing a variety of levels of business systems' sophistication in practice far outweighs the other considerations. As depicted below, the benefits to students and the enhancement of their ability to apply their discipline knowledge increase the development of future managers who can implement sound business management concepts in their workplaces.

Table 7: Service Experiential Learning Model

Student Enhanced Performance and Development

Community Need Fulfillment

Implementation of Project

Student Motivation and SKA Preparation

Professor Passion

Community and Pedagogical Need

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