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# Doing Good While Doing Well: Service Learning Internships

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**I**NTERNSHIPS FOR STUDENTS in business and professional communication have rightly been seen as a transitional form of coursework: a guided move away from academia and into the workplace. The assumption accompanying this vision has been that, since most business and professional communication students will graduate to work in industry, the best placements for them are, therefore, necessarily in industry as well. Certainly industry-sponsored internships are valuable as career preparation.

However, my five years of experience coordinating internships for our Technical & Professional Writing Program at San Francisco State University convinces me that internships in nonprofits often can provide many of the same transitional benefits as internships in industry, and more. This article makes the case for that claim plus provides practical guidance for professors who oversee internships for business and professional communication students.

## **What Earns an Internship the "Service Learning" Label?**

In recent years, a number of colleges and universities have made some form of community service a graduation requirement. Even where community service is not required, administrators and community members may join in encouraging students to practice it. And many professors incorporate into their curricula what has come to be called service learning: an integration of community service with subject matter learning by informed application of classroom principles within organizations that serve their communities.

If your college has a formal definition that establishes criteria for

community service or service learning to count toward graduation requirements, then it may be important for you to be sure that your internships for professional communication students qualify in terms of that definition. Absent such guidelines, you might develop your own description of what constitutes a service learning internship, using the following standards. Critically, the internship must be with a nonprofit, social service organization; in addition, it must involve learning about writing within a complicated political and cultural context; and, finally, it must include reflecting upon the power of communication to effect social change.

### **Interning with a Nonprofit Social Service Organization**

Every community has within it groups that support individuals who need more of a "safety net" or that work for social change. Students from our program have worked for a number of such organizations, differing widely in size, mission, staffing, and impact. Yet all of these organizations have appreciated, and often badly needed, help with problem-solving for internal writing projects or with external publications that meet professional standards. For example, one student wrote an annual report to givers for a major regional women's organization which, in addition to providing shelter space, legal services, and counseling, also supports women through political advocacy. Another student produced a database training manual for a small organization of volunteers who visit elderly shut-ins and who rely on the database for scheduling and follow-ups. A number of students have researched and drafted grant award proposals for nonprofits, some of which have successfully funded new initiatives or ongoing operations.

Students also have produced other public relations and fundraising materials, such as direct mailers and press releases for special events, house organ newsletters, computerized slide shows for pitch meetings, and so on. Many nonprofits also need Websites, and students have sometimes created these from scratch; at other times, they have provided substantial new content, editing services, or state-of-the-art re-designs. For some smaller organizations, this kind of development work is critical for survival. At the

other end of the nonprofit opportunity spectrum, a number of our students have interned at a magazine that is the glossy, quarterly publication of the academy that also operates a major city science museum. Some of our students have interned with professional associations as well, developing special event publications, member communications, and proposals for changes in branch-headquarters operations.

Whatever the nature and specific mission of a nonprofit social service organization, it will have a need, possibly many urgent needs, for effective, efficiently produced business communications. And, given that most such organizations have limited funding, ambitious agendas, and/or unbalanced staff-volunteer ratios, the time and communication expertise that students in all of our programs can contribute creates a community service opportunity.

### **Learning about Writing in a Complicated Political and Cultural Context**

Of course, for a service opportunity to be a valid, credit-earning learning experience, the work that students do must be relevant to their coursework and challenge them to intelligently apply the principles, methods, and skills that they have learned in academic settings. Fortunately, nonprofits can be an exceptionally valuable training ground for building on professional communication curricula. Many topics that we can address in classrooms only through cases and simulations—such as the impact of organizational culture and hierarchy, multi-cultural workgroups and audiences, and ethical conflicts—can be as well demonstrated and experienced in nonprofit workplaces as in industry. One student noted that her service learning internship taught her about “the tightrope an editor must cross in the course of getting out a publication . . . the frustration that comes with trying to get information out of people . . . [and] the personal dynamics involved with . . . [an] organization.”

In fact, students who do service learning internships often get a more intense or direct perspective on such hard-to-teach topics than do students in industry workplaces, because of the nature of

the organizations in which service learning interns work. Most nonprofits are governed by boards, which may be much more overtly political and directly controlling of staff than typical corporate boards. And such boards often are less detached from day-to-day operations. Staff-volunteer hierarchies also often teach powerful lessons about how status, persuasive management, recruitment, and morale affect organizational well being—and about how those elements may be developed, reflected, confirmed, and/or undermined by communication within organizations. The social service missions of nonprofits also tend to involve them with diverse social groups, teaching lessons about adaptive communication that internships in less diverse for-profit organizations may not provide. The missions of nonprofits also typically have an overt ethical component which may need to be expressed (or tested) in even the most mundane, daily forms of communication.

Because the common characteristics of nonprofit social service organizations tend to make them excellent laboratories for demonstrating how context affects rhetorical strategies, coordinators of internship programs can and should expect service learning internships to provide rich and appropriate environments for moving beyond the textbook.

### **Reflecting on the Power of Communication to Effect Social Change**

Another distinction usually drawn between simple community service and service learning is that service learning requires students to articulate the connections between their classroom studies and their field experiences. In course-based service learning placements or projects, this is often done by means of journals or sharing sessions among students with similar placements. These approaches also can work for students who do service learning internships. In our program, we ask students to discuss such issues both in their meetings with the professor coordinating the academic element of the internship and in a final reflection essay. Our students report not only on what they have learned about writing per se, but on what they have learned about how communication

contributes to an organization's power—and how that power in turn can make a difference to those outside the organization.

This expectation—that students will not just “do good,” but also understand the nature, mechanisms, and dimensions of doing good by using communication as a means to that end—ensures that service learning internships always teach analytical skills and reinforce values about the importance of communication.

### **The Value-added for Students**

Simply defining service learning internships in the manner described above makes the argument that they are valid alternatives to industry-based internships. Students can “do well” for their future careers by means of service learning internships. The experiences of students in our program suggest, moreover, that service learning internships frequently provide distinctive benefits that could make them a better choice for many students. Often service learning internships expose students to a wider range of writing forms, challenge them with enhanced expectations for initiative and expertise, and provide them with more meaningful work that has extended consequences.

### **Exposure to a Range of Writing Forms**

Nonprofit social service organizations often have flattened hierarchies in which most staff and volunteers have direct community service responsibilities. Because few staff may have the time or skill for writing tasks, commonly such work goes undone (or is done less than professionally). Typically, student interns at nonprofits encounter a multitude of needs for their skills and can pick among projects, or choose several different ones. This provides a significant advantage over being pigeonholed into doing repetitive editing or low-level re-formatting tasks, which is sometimes the case in industry placements. And while some student interns working in industry have even been asked to do clerical or administrative work as a significant part of what was contracted as a writing internship, students working for nonprofits have not reported such problems. Instead, those who intern at nonprofits

often comment on the variety of writing forms that they worked with during their internships.

### **Enhanced Expectations for Initiative and Expertise**

In addition to a flattened hierarchy, nonprofit social service organizations often are under-staffed. Even larger nonprofits typically have equally large social missions, with almost unlimited constituencies who have extended needs. As a result, students in such placements rarely find themselves over-managed. Instead, they often are expected to exhibit the “pitch in” mentality common to many organizations that rely heavily on volunteers. This can be a wonderfully empowering and exhilarating experience for student interns, especially as compared to the high-control environments often found in many industry placements. Our students frequently are considered writing specialists in the nonprofit organizations they assist, which can spur those students to work harder and better. Rather than passively receiving instruction and feedback, student interns at nonprofits often can actively suggest projects and make decisions about content, style, and production.

### **Meaningful Work with Extended Consequences**

Perhaps one of the most important advantages for students of service learning internships is that the causes such students work and write for typically are so important and engaging. When a student produces a grant proposal that leads to an award that creates funding for a program initiative that can affect dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of community members, the satisfaction of that work is undeniable. Even work for nonprofits that has fewer tangible or direct rewards typically supports an organization with laudable goals. The value of this is clear. As one student said of a service learning experience, “This kind of work elicits more commitment, because the consequences are real and important to me.” Interestingly, some students also feel that community internship experience looks particularly positive on resumes, showing good citizenship and the ability to make a difference.

## **Value-added for You and Your Program or College**

Even if there is already an established internship program in place for your students, setting up a service learning option within that program, and convincing students and colleagues that it is worthwhile to do so, may take some time and effort. Is it worth your trouble? Your answer should be yes, if any of these benefits might be important to you: more engaging cases for discussion and future classes, improved internal links and support for campus organizations, and stronger links with the off-campus community.

## **Provides Engaging Cases for Discussion**

In part because of the impact that writing for a nonprofit can have, I have found that internships in such social service organizations often provide excellent case studies for classes. In discussing ethics, for example, I sometimes raise the experience of a student intern asked to imply in a press release that the mayor was expected to attend an upcoming fundraising event at the sponsoring organization. The student knew that, while the mayor had indeed been invited, his attendance was considered unlikely by key players within the organization's staff. Nevertheless, the student's protest was answered by an executive who instructed the student to do what was asked, explaining that, because the cause was excellent, the organization's needs great, and the implication not technically false, the pitch was legitimate. This circumstance created a dilemma for the intern that has continued to engage other students' thoughtful attention, encouraging them to examine the potential negative temptations and consequences for a variety of stakeholders in both the intern's and the supervisor's responses. (By the way, just to make the discussion of "do the ends justify the means?" and "when should one draw the line at following orders?" tougher, the student did write the press release as directed; the mayor did come; and the event was a critically-needed success for the organization.)

Of course, typically student interns are still in our classes as they complete their internships. And I have repeatedly found that stu-



dents in service learning internships are often eager to share with other students their experiences with empowering writing. As one service learning intern enthused, "I loved the intellectual and professional climate. . . . We had many interesting discussions about science and the humanities." Other students' response to such an attitude is almost always quite favorable. Respecting the causes for which service learning interns work, their peers typically respond to nonprofit on-the-job narratives with interest and support.

### **Develops Internal Links and Support for Campus Organizations**

Often student organizations on campus actively support volunteer efforts and charity drives. Some departments, especially in social service fields, also may have established relationships with some community nonprofits. Building on such links can get students and faculty working together in new ways, as well as supporting campus collegiality. As an example of this synergy, one of our students designed a Website for a nonprofit as an internship assignment. Recognizing that the site would need further development and maintenance work, the student contacted the professor of a Web design class in an external department (part of a different college within our university) and provided help in structuring that work as a major class project in a Web design course. That professor, in turn, has now given our students priority on admission to that high-demand course—a wonderful advantage for our program.

### **Strengthens Links with the Off-campus Community**

It is sometimes difficult to vie for the attention of area businesses that may support our students and programs through internships, grants, scholarship support, equipment donations, guest speakers, advisory board membership, recruitment attention, and so on. Many faculty who have pursued such relationships have been daunted by corporate hierarchies, shunted toward dead-end contacts with disinterested human resources personnel, and/or frustrated by long-standing organizational policies and priorities. But contacts that students make through internships may sometimes

be with exactly the decision-makers that faculty have failed to reach. Corporate executives are frequently members of nonprofit boards of directors or are otherwise active in community social service work. One of our students received high-level career mentoring from such an internship contact, while another sealed a job offer when she interviewed with a company manager who also was an enthusiastic supporter of the nonprofit where she had interned. Your students who intern in community service organizations favorably represent your program to a wider audience of business-people than may seem apparent initially.

### **Value-added for Community Partners**

The answer to this question might seem obvious: student writing interns provide free labor to nonprofits that need such assistance to advance their social service missions. But, as most of us who have overseen internship programs well know, internships also make demands upon the sponsoring organizations. They must provide appropriate work, mentoring supervision, and adequate tools for production. The sponsors also need to accommodate student schedules and to provide evaluative feedback to the academics who partner with them in designing the internship experience so that it can earn students academic credit. Despite these requirements, though, service learning internships provide sufficiently important benefits for nonprofit social service organizations to make them well worthwhile: relief for short-staffed managers, improved internal communication savvy, and new connections for support and volunteers.

### **Relief for Managers of Under-staffed Organizations**

Students in nonprofit internships frequently emphasize in final reports how grateful they are for their managers' time, because those managers are so busy. In parallel, the same managers' final evaluations often talk about our interns as lifesavers who accomplished projects that the staff's workloads otherwise would have made impossible. While such benefits can occur in industry workplaces as well, the nonprofits' tendency toward perennial under-

staffing make writing assistance a more urgent need. Also, social service professionals sometimes do not have the training in business communication more common among managers educated for business specializations. As a result, even nonprofits with armies of volunteers may not have among them anyone qualified for high-level writing tasks . . . until a communication intern arrives.

### **Improved Communication Savvy**

Based on our students' reports, often one of the most rewarding aspects about a service learning internship is the experience of being seen as "the writing expert" in an organization. Again, social service nonprofits often do not have staff trained in communication skills. Even when they do, there still may be a gap in current tools skills, familiarity with a range of writing forms, and/or comfort with techniques for publications project management, electronic research, oral presentation, and so on. One student intern, for example, took on the task of evaluating a nonprofit's image as reflected in all of its publications, then developed a plan for increasing consistency and avoiding duplication among materials. As a result of this type of input, internship supervisors from nonprofits are more likely than those in industry to praise and appreciate student interns for bringing to the organization both new knowledge and creative ideas about communication.

### **New Connections for Support and Volunteers**

Industry internships usually end when scheduled, unless the student is hired to stay on. The pattern with service learning internships is often the opposite; students frequently stay involved with and committed to organizations long after their internships have ended. These students may involve family, friends, and other students as well, adding to the nonprofits' volunteer and donor base. Interestingly, I have seen this effect happen even when students did internships at social service organizations chosen for reasons of convenience (schedule, location, etc.). Although students may not start out committed to a cause, they often get hooked—to the advantage of the internship sponsor.

## **Getting Started**

The major requirement for making service learning experiences part of a business or professional communication internship is an academic leader's desire to launch that initiative. Although our program is located in a major urban area, even smaller communities and suburbs have social service needs and organizations that meet them. To connect with those organizations, students, campus contacts, and faculty support all can play a role.

## **Student Contacts**

Again, student organizations already may have connected your students with qualifying area nonprofits. In addition, students' own commitments to causes and public policy concerns can make them a primary source for identifying likely placement opportunities. Many times no brokering on the part of faculty is required to set up an internship contract.

## **Campus-community Connections**

Most colleges have established ties with communities to collaborate on "town-gown" issues. These ties to community leadership can be explored to identify good targets for service learning internships. Our university, like many others, also has established long-term relationships with a number of social service organizations to which it funnels student volunteers—both for charity projects and to fulfill service learning requirements in other courses. Finally, checking with the heads of social service and education departments at your college could introduce you to a new network of potential sponsors at nonprofit organizations.

## **Faculty Support**

Individual faculty often have ties to social service organizations, not only through their research and teaching, but based on personal commitments. Your colleagues can be an excellent source of recommendations and contacts. In addition, various published resources for developing service learning coursework provide advice and

strategies for identifying service learning partnerships. These resources include accessible and information-packed Websites:

- The National Council of Teachers of English has extensive resources directly supporting service learning in composition: [www.ncte.org/service](http://www.ncte.org/service)
- Campus Compact is a well-established organization that has led the effort to promote service learning programs, so it addresses a range of related higher education issues: [www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)
- Campus Outreach Opportunity League has long been dedicated to promoting community service among college students and is active on campuses across the country: [www.cool2serve.org](http://www.cool2serve.org)

### **Satisfying Your Students' Needs**

Quotations from several interns may demonstrate how placements satisfy student needs:

I considered the internship to be a valuable experience, because . . . it allowed me . . . to work on a serious project that had a place in the community (as opposed to only having a place in the classroom); to work on and manage multiple, complex, and large projects; and to gain real experience working for, essentially [though not actually], a corporate environment.

[I] learned the satisfaction of working with people who really appreciate your work: you are volunteering along with them in a good cause, side-by-side at the front, and it feels good. . . . I . . . learned a lot.

In [our program], I often feel the odd man out, having less computer background than most of my classmates. At [nonprofit organization] I felt at home, reassured that if I had something to say and said it well, I was a valuable addition to the staff. My opinions and experiences were sought. . . . This acceptance was an important milestone, giving me a sense of myself as a professional. . . . As for career implications, I'm confident the inclusion of this internship . . . will strengthen my resume.

I now feel far more prepared for working in industry. . . . I think [nonprofit organization] is a good environment to gain work experience.

As service learning projects and coursework become more and more a part of our academic landscapes, those of us who oversee business and professional communication internships can be in

the vanguard, providing our own service: to our students, to our programs and colleges, and to our communities.

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