The Frequency, Form, and Perceived Benefits of Service Learning in Speech Communication Departments

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BECAUSE internship experiences offer communication majors a juncture for connecting theoretical knowledge with life experiences, internship programs are nearly universal in speech communication departments nationwide (Hyre & Owens, 1984; McCroskey, 1979; Phelps & Timmis, 1984; Sellnow, Littlefield, & Sellnow, 1994). Most commonly, internships are considered a primary means of enhancing students' employability as "companies find that former interns are an excellent pool from which to select new employees when the need arises" (Hyre & Owen, 1984, p. 376). However, experiential learning opportunities are not exclusive to students who are fortunate enough to acquire traditional internships in a corporate setting. Phelps and Timmis (1984) refute assumptions that internships should be limited to profit-seeking organizations. Instead, they claim that "any particular internship experience is best judged by its nature, scope, complexity, and effectiveness," all of which they contend can be met satisfactorily in less traditional settings (p. 74). One such setting that has received substantial attention recently is service learning.

Service learning is defined in this study as "a structured program of community service combined with deliberate reflection and critical analysis" (Lieberman & Connolly, 1992, p. 8). Traditional internships involve students "receiving credit for practical experience gained outside the classroom, with some degree of supervision by a faculty member" (Sellnow et al., 1994, p. 69-70). Hence, all service learning experiences, as defined here, are internships, however, internships which do not focus primarily on providing voluntary service to a community do not constitute service learning. Conversely, service activities with no opportunity for structured reflection coordinated by an educator are not considered service learning. Currently, over 700 colleges and universities have formal service programs (Cooper, 1993), and national organizations, such as Campus Compact and the National Society for Experiential Education, have flourished as resources for those that incorporate service learning into their curriculum. Despite the widespread application of and general interest in

service learning, little research has been conducted regarding the role of service learning in educating communication majors. In an effort to diminish this chasm of inquiry, more than 300 communication departments were surveyed with two guiding questions in mind: a) How is service learning perceived by communication educators? and b) What service learning opportunities do communication departments make available for their students?

METHOD

During the winter of 1995, 358 surveys were sent to chairpersons of departments listed in *The Communication Disciplines in Higher Education: A Guide to Academic Programs in the United States and Canada* (Elmore, 1993). In an effort to focus the study, only programs in the United States which offered undergraduate degrees in speech communication and had existing internship programs were included. One additional mailing was completed for those who did not respond within the first three weeks. The response rate was promising with 263 (73%) surveys completed and returned. Eight (3%) surveys were returned from departments that indicated they no longer had internship programs.

The survey instrument included 16 close-ended questions. Respondents were given the opportunity to offer further written clarification of their answers at any point on the survey. Four questions focused on demographic matters. The form of service learning opportunities was ascertained in two questions. One question addressed the frequency of student participation in service learning. Finally, the majority of questions, eight in all, concentrated on the respondents' perceptions of service learning as an educational opportunity for their majors.

Responses were tabulated in the form of frequencies and percentages. Results are reported in the order of the question categories identified above.

RESULTS

Demographics

Enrollment size of responding institutions varied widely. The majority of responses, however, came from schools with enrollments of fewer than 2,501 students (33%) or more than 10,000 (30.7%). The distribution of the remaining respondents' school sizes was relatively even between these two categories. Most departments had fewer than 51 majors (32%) or between 51 and 150 majors (36%). Schools with 151 to 300 majors accounted for 16% of the sample and schools with more than 300 majors also represented 16% of respondents. Slightly more of the responses came from public institutions (54%) than from private institutions (46%). Department chairs completed 79% of the surveys, while 15% were completed by internship coordinators. The remaining surveys were completed by individuals who checked the "other" category.

Frequency of Service Learning in Speech Communication Departments

A sizable majority of the respondents accept service learning as part of their internship programs. Academic credit was granted for service learning through 240 (94%) of the respondents' internship programs. As these figures indicate, there is an appreciable opportunity for students to engage in service learning as part of their speech communication major. However, most departments (77%) see 25% or fewer of their students completing service learning internships. Of the remaining departments, 17% indicated that 26%-50% of their students opted for service learning internships and 6% revealed that more than 51% of their students completed service learning projects.

The 11 respondents who indicated that their internship programs did not include service learning were asked to explain why they felt this was the case. Topics that emerged in these open-ended responses are as follows: lack of awareness on the part of students, insignificant interest on the part of students and administration, volunteer programs already exist on campus, lack of fit with curriculum, and impracticality of coordinating service learning.

Form of Service Learning in Speech Communication Departments

In an attempt to discern the form of service learning internships completed by speech communication majors, respondents were asked to describe the degree of supervision enacted by the department, to identify the types of groups served, and to determine the level of contact the students have with other individuals.

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which the following three elements were part of their departments' coordination and supervision of service learning placements: orientation and training, meaningful service, and structured reflection. These elements were included in the survey because they appeared consistently in the literature as vital to the service learning process (Kendall, 1990; Kupiec, 1993; National Youth Leadership Council, 1989; Stanton, 1987). The majority of respondents indicated that all three elements are present in their students' service learning experiences. Orientation and training were *always* provided to students by 30% of the respondents and were *sometimes* offered in the programs of an additional 30% of the respondents. Of the remaining respondents, 18% rarely offered orientation and training, while 14% never did so. Eight percent of the respondents were unsure.

Meaningful service was defined in the survey as the quality of the placement in terms of meeting community needs and being meaningful to the students. Nearly all of the respondents indicated that their students engaged in meaningful service either always (43%) or sometimes (48%). Three respondents (1.3%) indicated that their students rarely did meaningful service, eight (1.7%) said their students never did so, and fifteen (6.3%) were unsure.

Finally, a clear majority of departments (62%) always provide structured reflection for their students involved in service learning experiences. Such reflection was sometimes offered by 24%, rarely occurred in 7%, and was never available to students in two departments (.8%). Thirteen respondents (5.4%) were unsure.

To determine the types of groups or agencies that are served by speech communication students, respondents were provided with a list of potential benefactors identified in the literature and were asked to check all that had been served by their students. Table One indicates that speech communication students serve in an assortment of situations. The majority of programs have their students provide social services or complete health-related tasks.

Results from the survey question which focused on the level of contact students had with others in their service learning experiences indicated that most students interact directly with others. Respondents were asked to check any of the following categories that applied to the interaction their students experienced when completing service learning internships: one-to-one, group, working independently. The majority of respondents indicated that their students had contact with others one-to-one (72%) or in groups (66%). Only 15% of the respondents indicated that their students complete projects which required them to work alone. As such, communication appears to be a vital element in service learning activities completed by the students described in this study.

TABLE 1
Types of Groups Served in Service Learning Experiences

Rank	Group	n	[a]%
1	Social Services	184	72.2%
2	Health Services	143	56.1%
3	Education	125	49.0%
4	Youth	115	45.0%
5	Adults	105	41.2%
6	Senior Citizens	78	30.6%
7	Environment	69	27.1%
8	Crisis Projects	64	25.1%
9	Legal	53	20.8%

[a]The percentages represent the percentage of the 255 respondents who marked that choice and do not sum to 100%.

Perceived Benefits of Service Learning in Speech Communication Departments

In general, respondents perceive service learning as equal to traditional internships in terms of learning and other benefits for their students. Most of the respondents (89%) agreed with the statement, "Traditional internships and service learning experiences provide equal potential for learning." Of the remaining respondents, 5% disagreed and 6% were uncertain. Further, the majority of respondents indicated that their students could gain knowledge and experience in a diversity of communication areas. Table Two reflects the data generated by a question which asked respondents to check all of the communication areas that they felt could be addressed in service learning internships. The only area not identified by at least 60% of the respondents was mass communication skills. This lower ranking may be due to the fact that the respondents were from speech communication departments. Hence, these students would not necessarily be focused on learning mass communication skills. Respondents offered a wide variety of input in the space allotted for the "other" response. The following areas were mentioned as having the potential of being addressed by service learning internships: public relations, counseling and intervention, negotiation, mediation, debate, intrapersonal communication, critical thinking skills, ethics, and instructional skills.

TABLE 2
Areas of Communication Applied in Service Learning Experiences

Rank	Group	n	[a]%
1	Interpersonal Communication	244	95.7%
2	Written Communication	229	89.8%
3	Organizational Communication	221	86.7%
4	Small Group Communication	219	85.9%
5	Public Speaking	176	69.0%
6	Intercultural Communication	173	67.8%
7	Mass Communication	154	60.4%
8	Other	23	09.0%

[a]The percentages represent the percentage of the 255 respondents who marked that choice and do not sum to 100%.

When asked to compare the benefits of service learning with the benefits of traditional internships, the majority of respondents saw no consequential difference. Specifically, 62% indicated that service learning internships have the same benefits as traditional internships, while 5% claimed that service learning had fewer benefits. Of the remaining respondents, 10% saw service learning as having greater benefits than traditional internships and 23% were unsure. Respondents were asked to delineate the perceived benefits of service learning for both students and speech communication departments. Based on the literature, lists were generated for both types of benefits. Respondents were asked to check all benefits they perceived in their experiences with students completing service learning internships. Table Three indicates that the majority of respondents believed students received benefits in all of the areas listed. Respondents listed the following benefits in the "other" category: more autonomy and responsibility, use of cutting edge technology, self-esteem, leadership traits, and portfolio material.

Several benefits for college or university departments were also identified in the literature. These benefits were listed, and respondents were again asked to identify all benefits they perceive their departments have or could gain from allowing their students to complete service learning internships. As Table Four indicates, nearly all respondents see benefits in terms of campus and community relations; however, the respondents were much less convinced that student retention could be enhanced by service learning experiences. Respondents recorded the following benefits in the "other" category: supports educational mission, provides program assessment data, enhances student perception and preparation, alumni contacts, contacts for professional research and training, and improves curriculum design.

TABLE 3
Student Benefits from Service Learning Experiences

Rank	Group	n	a%
1	Possible Career Connections	238	93.3%
2	Integration of Theory with Practice	225	88.2%
3	Career/Vocational Clarification	220	86.3%
4	Sense of Purpose	210	82.4%
5	Sense of Social Responsibility	207	81.2%
6	Enjoyable Experience	190	74.5%
7	Regard for Cultural Difference	174	68.2%
8	Other	13	0.5%

[a]The percentages represent the percentage of the 255 respondents who marked that choice and do not sum to 100%.

TABLE 4
Departmental Benefits from Service Learning

Rank	Group	n	a%
1	Improves Campus/Community Relations	234	91.8%
2	Increases Job Placement	192	75.3%
3	Addresses Diverse Learning Styles	143	56.1%
4	Increases Student Retention	86	33.7%
5	Other	20	07.8%

[a]The percentages represent the percentage of the 255 respondents who marked that choice and do not sum to 100%.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The widespread availability of service learning opportunities for students in speech communication departments reflects the national trend, across disciplines, to emphasize service learning on college and university campuses (Eskow, 1980; Rubin, 1987; Sigmon, 1993). While this current surge is a product of the past decade, the concept of service learning is not new. Wieckowski (1992) observes "the idea that students, as well as society, could be served by going outside the walls for practical experience was promoted at Harvard by the late 1890's" (p. 208), and Dewey (1957) encouraged instructors to "recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth" (p. 35). As such, the movement by speech communication educators toward offering service learning as an alternative in experiential education is both justified and compelling. The fact that there is little discernible difference in the availability of service learning between institutions with different missions, enrollment, or locale further supports the notion that most speech communication departments have answered the call to make service learning available to their students.

This availability of service learning appears to be due, in part, to the benefits for students and departments that the faculty perceive. Most respondents see service learning as equal to traditional internships in providing students with experiences that allow them to apply their communication skills and knowledge in authentic settings. A host of benefits to the speech communication departments themselves were also identified by a majority of the respondents. Perhaps most importantly, respondents believed students who completed service learning internships had made meaningful contributions to fulfilling a diversity of community needs.

Service learning provides yet another benefit in that it can substitute for traditional internships when such opportunities are lacking. Phelps and Timmis (1984) explain that the availability of traditional internships with profit-seeking corporations is often limited. Because service learning experiences were seen by the majority of respondents as being equal to traditional internships in educational value, service learning experiences are a logical alternative for students who cannot or choose not to engage in traditional internships. More than half of the respondents also indicated that service learning addresses diverse learning styles. Consequently, some students may be reached more effectively through service learning than through traditional internships or classroom activities.

Each of the attributes discussed here could have far reaching effects for speech communication departments. Yet, if students are not aware of these benefits, they are not likely to pursue service learning as an option. The fact that most speech communication departments see only one quarter or fewer of their students engaging in service learning gives reason for scrutiny. Internships that follow closely to a traditional apprenticeship metaphor appear to remain dominant in speech communication departments. There is certainly nothing inherently flawed with this emphasis on internships which offer experiences more obviously related to the career aspirations of speech communication students. However, one explanation listed by several respondents who do not offer service learning opportunities to their speech communication majors concerned a lack of awareness on the part of students and administration. This matter of awareness is further complicated by the fact that only half of the respondents frequently offer orientation and training to their students before they engage in service learning internships. If speech communication departments wish to make a commitment to providing service learning as a viable alternative for their students, they must engage in an orientation program that allows students to see the potential benefits of service learning and to compare them to the advantages of traditional internships. Although orientation and training may be lacking in many speech communication programs, it should

be noted that a vast majority of departments engage their students in meaningful service and devote time to supervised reflection by students.

The benefits speech communication departments and their students stand to gain from participating in service learning warrant further exploration. For example, the growing trend toward decreasing public funding for higher education makes it essential for colleges and universities to maintain positive relationships with their communities. Improving campus and community relations was one of the benefits of service learning that was most frequently identified by respondents. Hence, service learning programs could make a notable contribution to the efforts of faculty and administrators to enhance their public images. The data obtained in this study clearly suggest that most speech communication departments are positioned to take advantage of this and other potential benefits of service learning.

Increasing participation by speech communication students in service learning, however, may be restricted by a lack of resources. Most departments lack the resources necessary to grant release time to faculty whose students complete traditional internships (Sellnow et al., 1994). These limitations are perhaps even more intense for service learning. Lieberman and Connolly (1992) identified "lack of time, lack of money and materials, lack of information about community-based projects related to coursework and lack of recognition for their involvement in the tenure and review process" as restrictions to expanding service learning activity (p. 50). Future research should explore the degree to which these limitations are experienced by speech communication faculty and the possible means for overcoming them. Ascertaining the view of community groups and agencies that have been served by speech communication students is also necessary before we can fully understand the value of service learning to speech communication students and their departments.

As our higher education system continues to evolve, all departments can benefit from further inquiry into how service learning fits the changing needs of their students. Delve, Mintz and Stewart (1990) highlight perhaps the most vital of such needs. They argue that service learning can help students "develop a better understanding of and care for their fellow human beings and thereby become more accepting of our global interdependency" (p. 27).

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