

Case Study: Essential elements of organizing a student-initiated service-learning project in developing countries

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning brings different benefits to the undergraduate students including personal development, social responsibility, and improvements in academic learning (Eyler et al., 2000). In 2013, 12 students from 3 disciplines, engineering, health sciences and hotel management, initiated a service-learning project to Cambodia for 12 days. In this case study, we review the process of team formation, preparation and implementation. Finally, we suggest 7 essential elements as a guideline for implementing a student-initiated project.

Key Words: Service-Learning, student-initiated project, services experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

The formation of the team was based on the personal experiences of serving in Cambodia. In total, the team included 12 students and 9 of them have participated in a credit-bearing service-learning subject to Cambodia. Therefore, the team already equipped with a basic understanding of the situation in Cambodia. Starting from early 2014, liaison works were started with Cambodia YMCA, sought for the advice from the academic staff and finally, submitted the proposal for applying a scholarship. In total, 4 projects in 2 aspects, rural development and health care, were implemented in Sam Rong Village from 11 June to 22 June, which is a remote area 40 minutes from Phnom Penh. The projects included setting up a quality homestay program (Ibtahim & Razzaq, 2010), conducting a census survey in a slum area, promoting foot-care and holding a life-review workshop for the elderly. In the following session, successful elements for implementing a student-initiated project are discussed.

1.1 Form a team with multi-disciplinary students

University students have little experience of working with other professionals (Peabody, Block & Jain, 2008). However, multi-disciplinary knowledge is required to resolve the needs of a community. Also, different stages of the projects required various types of skills and knowledge. For example, the homestay program required professional input from hotel management's students while the health care program required knowledge from health sciences' students. Therefore, forming a team with multi-disciplinary students can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the projects.

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1.2 Understand the serving community

Limited by the budget, most of the student-initiated projects cannot afford a preparation trip. Therefore, if the team members had the service experiences, connection with the local NGOs and the cultural understanding of the serving community, the projects will be better prepared and promising. Otherwise, the impacts will be limited.

1.3 Setup a channel for raising public awareness of the community in need

Social media plays an important role in promotion (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). It not only establishes a positive image within the university to bring in more support of resources and manpower, but also easier for raising public awareness and donations. For instance, our team used Facebook as the channel to engage more university students to take-part in our projects, exchanging ideas and sharing our service experiences.

1.4 Seek professional input

Due to the complexity of the service setting, the team is suggested to seek advice from the academic staff with experiences in service-learning. They not only can offer proper trainings to the team, but also can provide professional suggestions to the projects. For example, our team was received a series of training workshops of art therapy before conducting the life review workshop in Cambodia.

1.5 Start the project liaison at least 6 months before the departure time

Working with organizations in developing countries would take a longer response time, sometimes even take weeks to get a reply. It is not only due to the limitation of infrastructure, but also the working habit and cultural differences. Therefore, the liaison works need to be started at least 6 months before the actual implementation time.

1.6 Confirm the funding at least 4 months before the departure time

Financial planning is crucial, as you need to estimate the budget for each project. Also, arranging the transportation and accommodation in rural area takes longer time. From the experiences, the funding needs to be confirmed about 4 months before the project time.

1.7 Train the trainers

Although direct service provides instant feedbacks and rewards, it cannot bring long-term impacts to the community. When planning the program, sustainability should be taken into account. Therefore, providing trainings to the organization's staff or volunteers are necessary.

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