

## Promoting Service Leadership through Service Leadership Learning among Chinese University Students

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### 1. ABSTRACT

In response to the service-oriented economy, effective service leadership, which is composed of moral character, leadership competencies, and a caring disposition (E=MC<sup>2</sup>, Chung, 2012), is advocated to nurture these qualities among university students. Based on the Service Leadership and Management Model (SLAM), a service learning subject “Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs” was introduced at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Through service delivery, university students were asked to apply their service leadership knowledge and skills. In 2014-15 academic year (Semesters 2 and 3), a total of 71 students participated in this subject and provided service to adolescents in two secondary schools under the Project WeCan. This paper aims at assessing the effectiveness of a subject focusing on developing students’ service qualities through service learning.

Key Words: service leadership, subjective outcome evaluation, service learning, Chinese university students

### 2. INTRODUCTION

Over 90% of Hong Kong’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) were generated from the service sector (Information Services Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2013). With a transition from a manufacturing to a service economy, there is a call for nurturing service leaders in a knowledge-based society. Under a rapid-changing world, the skills required for leaders include not only professional knowledge, but also intangible qualities (soft skills), such as flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Hirschhorn, 1988; Shek, Chung, & Leung, 2015). To equip the workforce with the relevant skills of the service industry, Chung (2014) argued for the importance of providing high quality and comprehensive training in tertiary education.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the Service Leadership and Management Model (SLAM), service leadership is conceptualized as providing a high quality of personal service to satisfy the needs of people around us (Chung, 2011). In particular, effective service leadership is composed of three main components: *moral character*, *leadership competencies*, and *a caring disposition* (i.e., E=MC<sup>2</sup>, Chung, 2012).

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These attributes are similar to those being advocated in service learning, which emphasizes on developing leadership skills, promoting awareness of social justice, and nurturing civic engagement (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The positive outcomes of service learning are well documented (e.g., Kim, Clasen, & Canfield, 2003; Simons & Cleary, 2006). However, evaluating the effectiveness of service learning program, especially in Chinese contents, is relatively scarce. More research in this area is warranted in order to assess how effective of these programs as a foundation for future training. This paper aims at assessing the effectiveness of a subject focusing on developing students' service leadership's qualities through service learning.

#### **4. METHODS/ANALYSIS**

With the financial support of the Victor and William Fung Foundation, a service learning subject "*Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs*" was developed and has been offered in two semesters (spring and summer) of 2014-2015 academic year. Through providing services to adolescents with emotional and behavioral problems, students were asked to apply their service leadership knowledge and skills. These service activities aimed at developing the target service recipients' intra- and inter-personal skills. Students were also expected to develop service leadership qualities by implementing service activities in two secondary schools (The Yuen Yuen Institute MFBM Nei Ming Chan Lui Chung Tak Memorial College and Semple Memorial Secondary School) joining the Project *WeCan*.

Students were invited to complete a subjective outcome evaluation form in the last lecture. This measurement scale assessed three aspects of the subject, including perceptions of the program (10 items), perceptions of the implementers (10 items), and the effectiveness of the program (18 items). Four open-ended questions were asked to understand their perceptions of the program (i.e., what they learned from the program, what they appreciated most in the program, how they perceived the program implementers, how the program can be improved). Descriptive statistics were performed through SPSS version 23.

#### **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 61 students completed the evaluation form. Students perceived the program and the implementers positively (over 90%). Students reported that the design of the curriculum was good (94%) and liked this subject very much (94%). In particular, a high proportion of the students reported that the subject had helped them understand the importance of service leadership and promoted their service leadership competencies. Also, they perceived positive changes in the following aspects: social competence (97%), handling emotions (96%), self-confidence (96%), care for others (96%), and a sense of responsibility (97%).

To further understand students' perceptions of the program, the response of the four open-ended questions were analyzed. Students reported that the program was beneficial to their interpersonal skills, such as collaboration with others ( $n=14$ ), communication skills ( $n=5$ ). They learned to organize service activities, such as writing service proposal/session plan ( $n=2$ ). Also, they reported that their problem solving skills ( $n=5$ ) were improved through service delivery. They identified the mutual benefit when working with the service recipients ( $n=5$ ). They evaluated the program implementers positively ( $n=17$ ) and appreciated their program implementers' assistance and guidance ( $n=5$ ), which were important for the implementation of service activities. They also

offered some suggestions for program implementation in the future, such as better coordination with the service providers (n=6), arranging service activities on weekends (n=1), providing financial aid for traveling to and from the service center (n=2). Overall speaking, students applied service leadership skills and knowledge and perceived improvement in their personal growth after enrolling this service learning subject. The intended learning outcomes of the subject were achieved.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION**

Good-quality tertiary education, together with service learning, helps equip our students with core skills and thereby enter the workforce with productive lives. Given the rise of the service-oriented economy, service leadership provides an important framework to nurture our students' employability in this fast-pacing world.

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