Opportunity for All: Linking Service-Learning and Business Education

Edward Zlotkowski

ABSTRACT. A major criticism of contemporary business education centers on its failure to help business students achieve sufficient educational breath, particularly with regard to the external environment of business. The service-learning movement offers business faculty an excellent opportunity to address this deficiency. By developing curricular projects linked to community needs, faculty can further their students' technical skills while helping them simultaneously develop greater inter-personal, inter-cultural, and ethical sensitivity.

Educational reform for the 21st century

We believe that because of the increasingly complex environment in which business operates, business schools must give more consideration to whether they have an appropriate balance between an internal and an external focus. . . . We were somewhat surprised that this did not seem to be as salient an issue as we thought it should be. Part of the reason may be that it is more of a subtle and diffuse issue than some other curriculum issues, but that does not mean that it is any less important. In our opinion, failure to address it in a more head-on fashion now will likely generate more pressure to do so in the not too distant future. (Porter and McKibbin, 1988, p. 85)

Thus Lyman Porter and Lawrence McKibbin register their sense of the growing need for business schools to deal more effectively and directly with the “external legal/social/political environment” of business. Nor is this the only place where the two authors address this issue. In their concluding set of recommendations, they point out that “senior executives in the business world” registered concern that “business school students tend to be rather more narrowly educated than they ought to be”:

From this perspective, business schools seem to be turning out focused analysts, albeit highly sophisticated ones, adept at measuring and calculating the probabilities of certain outcomes, but, at the same time, graduates who often are unwittingly insensitive to the impacts of these outcomes on factors other than the “bottom line”. This is a view with which we ourselves strongly concur. (Porter and McKibbin, 1988, p. 316)

To counter this trend, Porter and McKibbin suggest that “[business] management school faculties, in their responsibilities for the undergraduate education”,

ought also to concern themselves with the education of the whole student. They should proactively engage their colleagues across the campus to help ensure that business students come away from 4 years of acculturation in the university with exposure to a wider range of issues and ideas than is true of the typical business school graduate today. (Porter and McKibbin, 1988, p. 316)

The same recommendation is made for students in MBA programs insofar as these students have not already had “this kind of
exposure to breath in their baccalaureate degree programs” (Porter and McKibbin, 1988, p. 317).

The Porter-McKibbin report is not, of course, the only statement of its kind calling for greater breath in contemporary business education. What makes it especially noteworthy is its comprehensiveness and provenance, having been both sponsored and published by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Still, the report’s dispassionate call for greater educational engagement with our “increasingly complex environment” can, from many perspectives, be seen as but one more indication of a general paradigm shift in the direction of institutional – especially academic – social awareness and accountability.

At the 1992 annual conference of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), Carol Cartwright, then chair-elect of the AAHE board, skillfully summarized much of what that conference had learned about “restoring the public trust” in higher education (1992). She pointed out that non-academics invited to participate in the conference had confirmed what many academics already suspected; namely, that public trust of and public support for higher education have seriously eroded, that higher education desperately needs to face a growing “reality gap” – a gap between the needs of external society and the academy’s own “internal priorities”.

But eroding public trust is only one of several problems fed by this “reality gap”. As the contemporary writer Wendell Berry has pointed out, the fact that “Community is a concept, like humanity or peace, that virtually no one has taken the trouble to quarrel with,” has not precluded another fact; namely, that:

- neither our economy, nor our government, nor our educational system runs on the assumption that community has a value – a value, that is, that counts in any practical or powerful way. (Berry, 1987, p. 179)

Indeed, Berry’s concern with our endangered appreciation of community – that socio-economic unit whose members depend directly upon each other for support and who together comprise a single self-sustaining whole – finds ample support in the work of many contemporary sociologists. For example, in Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Robert Bellah and his colleagues remark upon the proliferation of a very different kind of social unit – the “lifestyle enclave”:

Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity. (Bellah et al., 1986, p. 73)

In short, one can not unreasonably conclude that the kind of insularity that has come to characterize not just educational institutions but even individual departments and disciplines may well be preparing students less to overcome than to perpetuate the social and professional fragmentation from which we suffer.

It is at least partially in response to this growing loss of community and higher education’s role in abetting it that the “service-learning” movement has developed. Encouraged both by organizations specific to higher education – such as Campus Compact – and by governmental programs – such as the new Corporation for National Service – the service-learning movement has, in the last few years, gained considerable momentum. Defined most simply, “service-learning” can be understood as “a specialized form of internship where students work in settings established primarily to meet some social and community need” (Wutzdorff, 1993, p. 33). However, what distinguishes service-learning from internships in the usual sense is not only the work setting – where “meeting some social and community need” is prioritized – but also the utilization of pedagogical strategies that promote reflection – both on the social dimensions of that need and on the learning process itself. Thus, in describing service-learning programs, Jane Kendall, editor of what is probably the single most important service-learning reference work, Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service, has offered the following, more specific definition: