Linking Business Education,
Campus Culture and Community:
The Bentley Service-Learning Project  Amy L. Kenworthy

ABSTRACT. This article describes the service-learning project at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. The Bentley Service-Learning Project (BSLP) has served as a catalyst for instituting the value of social responsibility into the business curriculum. With over 25% of the full-time faculty integrating service-learning into their courses, Bentley has had over 3000 students using their business skills to assist community agencies. The BSLP has helped to create an environment where business students, faculty, staff and administrators come together to work with and learn from the surrounding communities.

Introduction and background

Bentley College, located in Waltham, Massachusetts is a private, co-educational institution offering undergraduate and graduate programs specializing in business. There are approximately 3600 full-time undergraduate students and over 2000 graduate students. Bentley requires all degree candidates to complete a rigorous academic program incorporating business, liberal arts and sciences courses.

The Bentley Service-Learning Project (BSLP) grew out of a single interdisciplinary course called Values and Choices during the summer of 1990. Students in this course are challenged with questions about personal values and social stereotypes. When the topic of homelessness was introduced, the response was overwhelmingly negative about people in that situation. Immediately, an experiential component was incorporated as a class assignment where students visited a homeless shelter and talked with the residents. These site visits consistently had a transforming effect upon the students' stereotypes of the poor. The professor, Edward Zlotkowski, who later became the BSLP director, then used his experiences in the course as a tool for recruiting other faculty. Within four years, BSLP has grown exponentially with over 1000 students and over 25% of the full-time faculty participating each year and commitment and integration from 15 of 16 academic departments.

An important component of BSLP's success has been strong support from the college's administration. The administration is so committed to the service-learning model as a tool for educational development that it recently changed the mission of the college to reflect this philosophy. One of the core values that guides the mission is Social Commitment. This value definition reads as follows:

The College will actively pursue its commitment to provide increased opportunity for the less advantaged and to promote diversity throughout the entire College community. Through the Community Service Learning component of the curriculum each student will have an opportunity to help others.

To reinforce this message to the campus community, the administration has actively recruited graduation speakers with messages directly...
reinforcing the importance of “social responsibility”. Since 1992, these commencement speakers have included Elizabeth Dole, President of American Red Cross (1992) and Ben Cohen, Co-founder of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream (1993). Every fall, President Joseph M. Cronin sends a letter to the faculty addressing the importance of incorporating service-related projects into their courses.

Partially as a response to the above support, but also as an incentive tool for faculty, service-learning has been integrated into faculty tenure evaluations and job descriptions in various departments. Each spring a faculty award is given for outstanding work in this field. BSLP ran its first week-long faculty workshop in May 1994, funded internally, for faculty interested in serving as leaders in their fields, both in creating new curricular projects and in recruiting additional faculty support. Twelve departments, including six business departments, were represented. As a result, three service-learning course-pairings were developed linking business and liberal arts courses.

In a similar fashion, BSLP strives to create opportunities for the entire Bentley community to work together. One of the most popular campus-wide events involves a day of community immersion when interested students, faculty, staff and administrators go out into the community to perform service. Upon completion of the projects, each team designs a quilt square. The squares are then sewn together to create a lasting mosaic of the different activities and sites “served” by Bentley. As our “quilt collection” grows, it becomes a visually convincing argument for the power of service on campus.

**Pedagogical and organizational framework**

As the concept of service-learning became so widely adopted in the Bentley community, the underlying pedagogical principles that lie at the core of our effort needed to be defined. Service-learning projects are offered by departments including Accounting, Business Communications, Computer Information Systems, Economics, Finance, Management, Marketing and Law as well as Behavioral Sciences, English, Government, History, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Natural Sciences and Philosophy. The discipline-specific tools that students utilize in their projects are different but the underlying experiential patterns are the same. Students are learning about themselves and the community with a particular focus on becoming sensitive to issues of social inequality and injustice.

The connection to community and the redefinition of self through learning are two goals that are intertwined. Parker Palmer (1987) identifies the relation between community and our ways of knowing as critical to educational reform:

I believe that it is here, at the epistemological core of our knowledge and our processes of knowing, that our powers for forming or deforming human consciousness are to be found . . . It is here that the idea of community must ultimately take root and have impact. (p. 22)

Palmer argues that higher education needs to do a better job of teaching students to connect their experiences to the environments around them. Otherwise, students objectify the larger community surrounding their campus and create barriers to separate and protect themselves from its reality. His arguments for utilizing the classroom as a forum for students connecting their sense of self with experiences in the community directly mirror those of the service-learning pedagogy.

Glenn Gish (1990) writes that learning takes place at different levels for different people. Following David Kolb's model of experiential learning, these levels are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Gish believes that all students have preferred modes, the point at which all learning routinely begins. He argues that one of the challenges facing academic institutions is to create opportunities for students to experiment with their different modes, heightening their levels of learning. At BSLP, we create opportunities for students to experiment with different learning styles as they engage in curriculum-based experiences in the community.

The framework for BSLP was created using