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Merciful Practices of a Business Program: Looking In -- Reaching Out, a Case Study

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**MERCIFUL PRACTICES OF A BUSINESS PROGRAM:
LOOKING IN – REACHING OUT
A CASE STUDY**

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“While we place all our confidence in God, we must always act as if success depended on our own expectations.” – Catherine McAuley

INTRODUCTION

Can business be merciful? This paper provides a case study of the Salve Regina University Business Studies & Economics Department and how it works to better integrate the University’s mercy mission. Six years ago, the Business Studies & Economics Department drafted and adopted a mission-integration statement – the first step in formally recognizing the department’s interest in integrating the University’s mission into departmental activities.

The mission integration statement – in part – seeks “...to maintain an inclusive environment that promotes sensitivity to cultural diversity, human rights, human needs, social justice, social responsibility and environmental stewardship...”

Since the adoption of the mission-integration statement, the department has worked to identify ways in which the members of the department – students, faculty, and staff – can embrace and implement the mercy mission. Many programs have taken shape over the last 6 years which have been successful in providing opportunities for all members of the department to participate in service-based programs, thus creating a mercy culture within the department.

This paper begins with a working definition of mercy, the Salve Regina University mission statement, and the Business Studies & Economics Department mission-integration statement. The focus on the remainder of the paper will be on opportunities and challenges of “taking action” by

providing numerous opportunities for department members to get involved and use their skills to help others in the mercy tradition.

DEFINING MERCY

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2008), mercy is defined as follows:

“1 a: compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power; also : lenient or compassionate treatment <begged for mercy> b: imprisonment rather than death imposed as penalty for first-degree murder 2 a: a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion b: a fortunate circumstance <it was a mercy they found her before she froze> 3: compassionate treatment of those in distress <works of mercy among the poor>”¹

Defining mercy as compassion, as in “to show mercy,” limits the definition to only one aspect of mercy. To simply be able to identify an unjust situation is not necessarily to show mercy. Mercy requires an act – as in “an act of mercy.” For the purposes of this paper, and the Department of Business Studies & Economics, mercy is defined as including compassion and action – implying that without action, mercy has not occurred. Later in this paper, as the depth of the mercy experiences are discussed, we will see that often mercy as action produces a deeper, richer experience and understanding of the mercy mission.

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY MISSION STATEMENT

The mission statement of Salve Regina University, a university founded by the Sisters of Mercy, is vital to understanding why operationalizing the mercy mission is so important to our department, and why we continue to educate our students about the importance of working for a “...world that is harmonious, just, and merciful.” By offering our students opportunities for practicing the mission with the skills they possess in their chosen field of work, we give them a chance to recognize the power and value of their skills, and the impact they can have in the community. The Salve Regina University mission statement follows:

As a community that welcomes people of all beliefs, Salve Regina University, a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy, seeks wisdom and promotes universal justice.

The University through teaching and research prepares men and

women for responsible lives by imparting and expanding knowledge, developing skills, and cultivating enduring values. Through liberal arts and professional programs, students develop their abilities for thinking clearly and creatively, enhance their capacity for sound judgment, and prepare for the challenge of learning throughout their lives.

In keeping with the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy, and recognizing that all people are stewards of God’s creation, the University encourages students to work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful.²

TAKING ACTION

Part of the evolution of the Business Studies & Economics Department has included reflection on the “depth” of the mercy experience. Initially, mercy was equated with the recognition of business situations which were construed as unjust or unfair. These ethical situations and issues are relatively easy to identify in all of the business and economics majors – finance, accounting, management, administration, information systems, global economics, and marketing. An “ethics across the curriculum” approach was used to encourage faculty to work these ethical discussions into the various course content. Additionally, all business majors were (and still are) required to complete an Ethics for Business course as a core requirement. Initially, this was how the mercy mission was implemented in the department.

DEPTH OF MERCY EXPERIENCE



Thus, while the first step was “Recognizing Social Injustice,” the second step included the discussion of alternative solutions to these unjust situations. The solutions, however, were distant. “Does our industry recognize the social injustices, and how do they deal with them?” The analysis of alternative solutions gave students the ability to study organizations within the industry and how they overcome (or mitigate) these injustices. The goal, here, is to provide students with alternative solutions to these situations, so they may take them into the workforce after graduation. This problem-

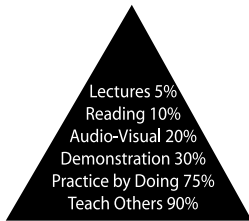
solution approach was a deeper mercy experience, as it implied that solutions are available, and that action is taken by some organizations.

The next natural progression took the form of developing a participative solution. “How can we make a difference now?” In this phase, the department recognized that “active experiences” during students’ college years implied that we, as a community, can take action and make a difference, and that we can help to overcome some of these unjust situations now. In addition, an important benefit to this step is that we can lead students to participate in solutions by practicing their business skills. This allows students to increase their retention of the material and improve their skills. Additionally, by orchestrating situations where the student works for a “real world” client – such as a non-profit organization – the student is able to add the experience to his/her resumé.

The active experiences provided by the Business & Economics Department are carefully crafted to encapsulate the mercy mission. For example, non-profit organizations that operate with lean staff and small budgets are often used as “clients” and paired with students who have the skills required to accomplish the tasks needed by the organization. We refer to these action-based experiences as service-learning – opportunities for students to practice discipline-specific skills while helping others in need. According to www.servicelearning.org, service-learning is “...a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”³ Integrating the Service Learning Program at Salve Regina University into the Business Studies & Economics Department accomplished those goals while acting as an important academic tool for learning.

The ability to integrate the academic learning, practical skills, and mercy mission has met with great success thus far. Clients have been appreciative of the assistance they have received; and students are eager to put their newly-learned skills to work. At the end of the experience, students are required to submit a reflection of their experience. The reflections emphasize not just the business skills developed, but also the application of mercy to their chosen profession. What we have found from a review of these reflections is that students practice more than their business skills in our service-learning programs. They practice mercy, kindness, patience, and compassion. What they learn goes beyond business theory, skills, and knowledge. It is more important than that.

Curricular focus in this program is on identifying and recognizing social injustices within the discipline of business (already discussed in many business texts in terms of ethics and social responsibility), discussing the issues related to the injustices and potential solutions (thus fostering decision-making skills, critical thinking, and compassion), and then giving the students the ability to create and implement their own solutions (thereby, taking action by utilizing the skills learned in class). The fundamentals of teaching remain intact – only issues related to the course or discipline are part of the curriculum.



*The Learning Pyramid
National Training Laboratories*

The Learning Pyramid created by the National Training Laboratories (*left*) supports the theory – skills – practice ideal sought here. Learning is more than conceptualizing; it is also about practicing and developing those skills. “The pyramid stipulates the average retention rate of information based on various teaching methods... the most effective methods, those that ensure the highest retention rates, depend on active experience.”⁴ In other words, on average, students retain 5% of what they hear in a lecture, 10% of what they read... 75% of what they practice by doing, and 90% of what they teach others. With this in mind, service-learning experiences related to business and economics are created.

Action-based service-learning programs currently used in the Business Studies & Economics Department include those offered in MGT212: Business Communications, MGT290: Human Resources Management, ISM304: Microsoft Certification, and MGT422: Marketing Strategies. Other courses plan to implement the service-learning option in the future. In addition, extracurricular service-learning opportunities are available through various academic clubs including the Accounting/Finance club with their Volunteers in Tax Assistance (VITA) program, the American Marketing Association, which has won numerous national awards for their service involvement, and more. These programs offer the students, faculty, and staff the ability to participate in programs that offer active experiences within the context of mercy, education, and skill development.

Examples of these programs include MGT290: Human Resources Management where students in the class are paired with local at-risk high school students to improve job preparedness, including the development of

resumés, practicing interviewing skills, and exploring different job opportunities upon graduation. Students in the ISM304: Microsoft Certification class work with lower-income adults who wish to learn various Microsoft applications to improve their job prospects. Some of these adults who become proficient in the Microsoft applications are passing the Certification exams. Students in MGT422: Marketing Strategies work with a non-profit client with little or no marketing staff or budget. The students work to create a marketing plan to achieve the client's goals, and may also implement some of the programs for the client.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Opportunities provided by the action-based programs discussed above include providing students with the ability to practice what they have learned, increasing retention of the concepts, providing students with activities that will enhance their résumé, and developing a culture of mercy to differentiate our business programs.

From an academic point of view, the most important opportunities come from enhanced learning. By practicing what they are learning and teaching others what they know, students are able to retain a higher percentage of what is learned. It also gives them the opportunity to put their knowledge and skills to work, moving beyond a conceptual viewpoint. The additional benefit of having the mercy culture embedded in learning provides an opportunity for students to “do good” and experience how valuable their skills are to others.

In the post-experience reflection, students have commented about expanding their knowledge, improving their communication skills, feelings of accomplishment, worth and importance as they help others, experiencing diverse cultures, and more. The following excerpts were taken from student reflections.

EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT REFLECTIONS

“Service-learning was a valuable experience that made me realize how fulfilling helping others can be. Seeing these women succeed in something that they’ve worked for was very satisfying for me, and it’s great to know that I helped them to achieve something that is such an asset in their lives.”

“From a strictly academic standpoint the project as a whole was a great way to encompass and include all the areas of marketing that I have studied over the past four years. The exciting part was that we were doing some good. We were actually helping a real place that needed some assistance. We were not just doing some hypothetical assignment out of a textbook.”

“After the project was completed, I was surprised to find that I was taught something from the experience as well. My personal communication skills improved because I pushed myself to speak and relate to other students with whom I normally would not have the opportunity. Furthermore, the course refreshed some of the basics that I had forgotten.”

“Academics aside, I also learned a lot about culture and how to interact with someone who has seemingly much different interests than my own. The background of these kids and my own is completely different, from the households that we were raised in to the activities that we do in our free time. In the beginning I found it a little hard to relate and talk but once we both started to get more comfortable a couple sessions in it made everything a lot easier. I found that as much as we are different, we have a lot of important similarities as well. At a basic level, we were both looking to get the most out of life. We both have hopes and dreams for what we want to accomplish and we are both looking for the best ways to get there. I think that this experience will allow me to not be so shy in the future. I am not someone who would usually just go up and talk to someone new, but I think that this experience will really help me open up to new things.”

By working with “real clients,” students are also able to note this experience on their resumés, and talk about the experience during the interviewing process. We see this as a value-added component of the program. In addition, we find from discussing this program with potential students and parents that it gives us a unique point of differentiation for our business program. Experiences are chosen that will enhance learning and celebrate the mercy culture; the added value of resumé enhancement and differentiation are bonuses to the students and department.

With any program come challenges. Challenges include managing “clients,” engaging students, integrating learning into action, and measuring success. We refer to “clients” as those who benefit from the activities of our students. Clients may be at-risk high school students, adults looking to enhance their employment skills, or non-profit organizations in need of marketing or management plans.

The challenges involved with managing clients include how to identify an appropriate client. A client must have a problem which fits into the learning outcomes of the class, fulfills the mercy mission, and is accessible as needed. Since the primary mission of the University is to educate, that goal cannot be lost in the implementation of the program. Once identified, there must be an orientation of clients and students in order to set the expectations of both groups. The client must understand that the learning process must be incorporated into the program, and that the program may take additional time due to the learning process. Managing client expectations (and setting them early in the process) is important. Students must also understand the purpose of the programs, and their role in them. Without commitment from both sides, there may be disappointment. Additionally, the client must understand that the instructor’s role is as a facilitator of the process. The client needs to understand that the instructor will not be completing the work, but will assist and advise students in completing the work.

Currently, our service-learning programs are voluntary and not all students or faculty members participate. This leads to the issue of engaging students. Students receive one credit for successfully completing a service-learning project. We have also found that students are motivated to participate based on recommendations from past participants, the need to enhance their résumés, and on community needs. The current generation of college students has already been exposed to numerous community service programs. Many middle schools and high schools require community service of their graduates. The heightened sensitivity of this generation to community needs also has been an impetus for their participation in service-learning.

The greatest academic challenge is in integrating the service program into the academic requirements of the course. This requires a great deal of flexibility to meet changing client needs while accomplishing course

objectives. Although sometimes difficult, it does give students a sense for what it is like to work for a “real” client in the “real” world.

Another challenge is measuring the success of the program. Currently, students are required to write a reflection about their experience. The reflections are not standardized, and do not specifically capture anything more than anecdotal data. Additionally, measuring the success of the program from the client side has not yet been implemented, and remains an area rich in further potential.

CONCLUSIONS

As we continue to foster opportunities for a “mercy experience” in the Business Studies & Economics Department, we seek to expand the breadth and depth of the experience. Ideally, all students would have the opportunity at multiple points in their academic journey to opt for a service-learning experience specific to their major. We are fortunate to have a university-wide commitment to the program, and administration support and assistance as needed.

We understand that it is important to offer the service-learning experience as it not only contributes to the mercy culture of the institution, and more specifically to the department, but also enhances learning, retention, students’ skills, and résumés. Finding this “fit” is important to developing and continuing the program.

Working as a facilitator of the experience, the faculty member must be flexible and look for the “teachable moments” instead of staying rigid to specific skills or outcomes. Clients change their mind, and having a flexible program is important. For that reason, this may not work in all courses. Having clear expectations of faculty, students, and clients is important. Improving measurement of student and client experiences seems to be the next step.

As the program grows, additional funding will be necessary to improve the depth of the experience. The expenses related to the programs are currently coming from either the client (however, some non-profits we work with have little or no budget), from small grants the students are able to pursue, or from grants written by faculty in the program. Further grant-writing (or other financial means) to support larger projects will improve opportunities for clients and students alike.

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