MBA and Service Learning: Management Students Tackle Challenges of Nonprofits

BY DAN BARON

For Jason Kiper and many other students enrolled in DePaul’s MBA program, the university has offered a new experience in learning how to solve problems faced by community organizations in Chicago.

Students in Alyssa Westring’s course titled “Managing for Effective and Ethical Organizational Behavior” engage in pro bono activities for nonprofit clients that are trying to address a range of organizational challenges. For ten weeks, students consulted with nonprofit staff to understand the organizations and then apply knowledge geared to improving their effectiveness. “I definitely think there’s a place for service learning in business school,” says Westring. “There’s already a strong focus in DePaul’s business school on being ethical and socially responsible, and the service learning experience builds on that.”

The class reflects a dynamic that is impacting students as well as the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. In 2007, Fortune Magazine reported that the nonprofit sector comprises “more than 10 percent of the total job market,” with “nonprofit career growth surpassing the private sector in 46 of 50 states.” Consequently, it is increasingly common for people in the business sector to find work within a growing nonprofit. The trend suggests the need for greater business acumen: nonprofits have been hit hard during this tough economic period and need to find ways to make it even when resources are scarce.

Westring’s MBA course opens the door for students to learn business skills, get hands-on experience with an organization, while applying their skills for the public good. “In some cases, completing these projects went smoothly, in other cases it was a struggle,” Westring says. “But even when there’s struggle, that’s part of the learning.”

Jeff Howard, Assistant Director for Faculty Development at the Steans Center, adds that Westring understood that “the class was not only about students learning, but about their opportunity to make a contribution to these organizations.”

Through this class, students begin to understand firsthand how a small nonprofit organization operates. Students

MBA students work with nonprofit staff as part of Alyssa Westring’s “Managing for Effective and Ethical Organizational Behavior” class.

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DIRECTOR’S LETTER

According to the National Center on Charitable Statistics, between 1999 and 2009, the number of 501(c)(3) non-profits in the U.S. expanded by 59% to over one million. In 2010, the assets of this sector was almost 2.5 trillion, the vast majority of which supported services in the fields of health, education, and human services. Furthermore, a recent report published by Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Economic Data Project (Philanthropy Journal), utilized U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from 45 states to show that nonprofit employment increased nearly 5% percent from 2007 and 2010, while the economic downturn during the same period led to a decline in employment of more than 8% in the for-profit sector. By all accounts, the nonprofit sector is a vital component of the U.S. economy and graduate business programs across the country have taken notice.

Not only do ranking publications such as the U.S. News and World Report list the top MBA programs for nonprofits, but commerce programs across the country are expanding their curriculum to include issues related to social inequality and environmental sustainability. A report from the Aspen Institute’s Center for Business Education (“Beyond Grey Pinstripes 2011-2012”) highlights that since 2009 there has been a 38% increase in required courses in finance that include social, ethical, or environmental content. Of the 149 MBA programs that participated in the survey, 79% required students to take a course focused on business and society. To interpret these statistics, however, one has to look beyond institutional offerings. Students are coming to MBA programs with an increasing interest in positively transforming society. A 2006 study by Net Impact (Chronicle of Philanthropy), states that among 2100 MBA students surveyed in North America, 81% affirmed that “businesses should work to better society,” and 89% stated that “business leaders should at least partly base decisions on environmental and social effects.”

This newsletter provides an example of how MBA programs across the globe are employing service learning pedagogy to build a sense of social and environmental awareness and responsibility among students. Though DePaul’s full-time MBA program is one of many that have made a strategic decision to integrate service learning into curriculum, it has done so in a unique fashion. Dr. Alyssa Westring’s course, highlighted in this publication, carves out projects that serve local small-scale community-based organizations that have the most need for business consulting. Her course is not simply about learning to be a good citizen or “to give back” to society. Students are guided to cross cultural boundaries and engage with communities with which they may not be familiar; they begin to understand the broad business challenges facing individuals and organizations that seek to address larger systemic and structural issues that impact us all; and they add value to organizations that are important assets to Chicago communities. When these students depart the university, regardless of whether they choose to enter the thriving non-profit sector, they will make important decisions that will likely impact others with fewer resources. Such decisions will be informed by a sense of social responsibility reinforced by their service learning experience at DePaul.
learned that while many nonprofits may have scarce resources, they also find creative ways to deliver much-needed services to communities. The courses instruct them on organizational behavior and then they apply what they’ve learned in the classroom to the field by providing specific insights about partner organizations.

Prior to engaging directly with the organizations, a staff member from Steans Center partners spoke to the class. Students were then divided among seven Chicago-based nonprofit organizations: Passages Alternative Living Programs, Inc., La Casa Norte, Arts of Life, Telpochcalli Community Education Project (TCEP), Rumble Arts Center, Josephinum Catholic School, and Project SYNCERE (Supporting Youths’ Needs with Core Engineering Research Experiments). After gathering data from the organizations, students presented their results to the organizations.

Rumble Arts Center
“DePaul came to us, knowing we had done internships with Steans, and said they had a development team that could work with us,” said Brook Woolf, Founder and Executive Director of the Rumble Arts Center, an all-ages multicultural community center in Chicago’s Humboldt Park community. “We said yes: our programs are pretty well-oiled, but we are trying to get our financing and organization in order.” The small organization is self-funded, and has about 4,400 square feet of rental space as well as a gallery and a kitchen.

Woolf adds that students and the organization worked together in a way that made it easier to address challenging issues faced by Rumble Arts. “Students asked some pretty hard questions,” she said, “and having them here made us more comfortable to learn something about them and why they chose to work with us.”

Students created job descriptions for Rumble Arts that clarified specific responsibilities. They also created a volunteer application for those people who want to serve with the organization.

Bree Johnson, program coordinator for the Center, says that DePaul students did their homework on the organization and came up with a useful framework for the project. “The information was organized in a way that maximized its usefulness,” she said. “They weren’t in the dark about things and had specific questions. In the end, the resulting data reflected what we knew were problems. Students assessed them clearly—even as outsiders. This was helpful because, like many groups,” she adds, “we sometimes fall victim to being too busy and don’t always have time to reflect on our needs and habits.”

Students used a variety of tools to assess the organization’s needs, including interviews, observation and surveys. “We learned that the way staff schedules were aligned, employees were only overlapping one day a week,” says Lesley DeMaio, a student in Westring’s course. “There were times when staff members thought another person was doing something that they weren’t actually doing.” In the end, students provided the organization with three new job descriptions. The documents not only specify what staff are responsible for, but serve as a tool by which employees can be evaluated.

The Arts of Life
One key element of the students’ projects was forging relationships with an organization (and its staff) in a short period of time. “Students were super-approachable and appreciated the time we took to talk with them,” says Denise Fisher, executive director of The Arts for Life, a small nonprofit that provides guidance, education and space to area adults with and without disabilities as they produce their own art. That eased our minds, and it was nice to get an objective view of how we work.” “They were very professional and considerate,” adds Ryan Shuquem, Art Director for the organization. “They had good ideas and definitely paid attention to what we had to say.” Students took a close look at Shuquem’s position during the process; one deliverable they suggested to the group was the transfer of the intern/volunteer process from the art director to the community coordinator.

Shuquem says that students learned about an all-too-common trait of life in small nonprofit organizations—“the nature of being
constantly stretched.” In his job, Shuquem coordinates collaborative projects with the community, oversees gallery shows and exhibitions, and works with artists directly.

Collaboration is not just a theme in his work, but in the work of students in Westring’s class who formed for ten weeks. “Everyone brought something different to the table,” says Jason Kiper, who worked with The Arts of Life. “That’s the big benefit of working in a group. One person may have strong communication skills, while another has more knowledge of information technology, and so on.”

“Students in this class are basically working together as consultants with organizations,” adds Kiper. “It’s a challenging job: how to get information from people without making them appear as if they are wrong. You have to realize that they know more about their organization and what they do than you ever will. You have to be careful and positive while wondering how they do their jobs.” He says that people he worked with at The Arts of Life were “very open-minded.”

Kiper also echoed what many who have participated in DePaul service learning courses say. “I was excited to take this class. This was learning that was going to take place in the world of work. I was glad to get that experience and jump right in.”

DePaul student Szalez Mayer says that while students focused on the job of providing a service to the organization, he also had a chance to appreciate what it does. “It was really inspiring,” he says “The Center gives people an avenue to express themselves, often by painting on different mediums including paper and stained glass windows.” At the same time, DePaul students learned just how challenging the development of a small nonprofit can be in today’s economy.

“Illinois is ranked 50th in the U.S. for funding of people with disabilities,” says Kelli Becker, community volunteer and intern coordinator for Arts of Life. “And, nationwide, 90 percent of people with cognitive disabilities are unemployed.” DePaul students working with The Arts of Life fine-tuned the organization’s job descriptions and researched how it might improve management of its volunteers. Student research included finding out more about how universities find interns and employees. DePaul students recommended a web-based program called Volgistics, a comprehensive volunteer software that is designed to make it easier to recruit, track and coordinate volunteer efforts.

The tool, which the organization adopted, costs a nominal monthly fee, but allows the organization to assign job tasks and manage schedules in, as one student noted, a more “seamless” way. The program is already yielding benefits, according to Fisher. “I can just go into this program and access meaningful information,” she says. “It’s easier to tell how many volunteers we have and what they are doing.”

This fall, Westring is teaching the management class again. She is also currently gathering data through surveys and questions for not-for-profits and former students to learn more about what works, and what doesn’t, in this type of MBA course. Meanwhile, DeMaio says the positive experience has changed her view of opportunities that might be available to an MBA in the nonprofit sector. “Because of my time working on this project, I learned more about how to connect classroom experience to an actual situation,” she says. “I can see myself volunteering or working full-time with a not-for-profit.”

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– Alyssa Westring, Assistant Professor Department of Management.
Meister Scholarship: A Commitment to Service

DePaul student Suzanne Hammer is working full-time, pursuing a master’s degree, and finding time to volunteer at a food bank in her community. She is also the recipient of a Meister Scholarship, a $1500 annual scholarship that recognizes students who “reflect on societal issues and problem solving methods” – and engage in service.

The Meister Scholarship was created in honor of Richard Meister, former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at DePaul. Meister, a social and urban historian, played a pivotal role in the development of service learning at DePaul—and founding of the Steans Center. “The idea of the scholarship is to allow students to take that second step into more engagement,” says Meister. “We have heard many stories of students whose lives have been changed by their service learning experience. We try to ensure that there is a pipeline for students so they can see public service not only as an avocation, but a vocation.”

“What we’re trying to create,” he adds, “is a holistic education that extends beyond the textbook. Service learning can enhance the learning environment, and in this case the scholarship can also meet the need of students to have financial assistance.”

For Claudio Rivera, the scholarship promotes values that are very much in tune with DePaul’s commitment to community involvement. “I saw that this scholarship was in line with a lot of my personal values and what DePaul adheres to,” says Rivera, who is studying for a master’s and Ph.D. in DePaul’s Clinical Community Psychology Program, a degree tailored for students to work with underserved communities. “There is an emphasis on serving underserved communities and promoting service,” he says. “In addition, the financial relief provided through the scholarship is a big help.” Rivera is currently mentoring adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18 on Friday nights at Holy Cross Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish on the city’s south side. Meanwhile, he is also providing direct mental health services for 15 hours a week to low-income people through DePaul’s Community Mental Health Clinic, work that requires outreach to schools and communities.

Rivera adds that there’s a personal component to his work as well. “Part of my commitment stems from my adolescence in an inner-city neighborhood,” he says. “The violence and poverty drove me to give others the opportunity to get support.”

Meanwhile, Zeyna Baki, who grew up in Turkey, has had a wide range of volunteer experiences at an international level – and is now supporting her research and service learning work with the help of the scholarship. Baki plans to graduate from DePaul’s School for New Learning this June with a degree in International Studies. Her background includes volunteering for an international women’s organization in Kosovo, including tutoring at an elementary school, participating in Breast Cancer Awareness Week activities and conducting outreach related to issues faced by local women. She has also conducted research for the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs in Afghanistan on mental health and women’s issues. In Turkey, As part of her current research at DePaul, she worked with rural populations in Turkey. “My passion is in international human rights work,” Baki says. “This field is very competitive, and having a chance to study and learn more about my experiences is going to make a difference as I continue this work.”

For Suzanne Hammer, getting a master’s in applied professional studies will help create opportunities for her in the world of philanthropy and grant writing. Her final project involves writing a grant for Sharing Connections, an organization that is one of only seven furniture banks in Illinois. Hammer, who worked as a banker for a community banking program for 15 years, now works for LifeSource, where she sets up blood drives for a variety of organizations, including companies, schools and churches. “I could not have combined my interests like this 20 years ago,” she says. “There was less awareness of public service.”

Now, Hammer says, the chance to study at DePaul’s School for New Learning and receive this scholarship have been an important part of her journey. The experience, she adds, is helping her build on something she has been doing all along. “My parents volunteered, I volunteer and my kids volunteer,” she says. “We’ve always done it. At DePaul, I’m able to apply what I’m learning in class to what I do in the field.”

The Meister Scholarship is part of the continuing effort to help create service learning opportunities for students like Hammer, Baki, Rivera and many others. “You think you have a paradigm of how students use this scholarship,” says Meister. “Then you see that students use it to create their own service learning experience.”
OPPORTUNITIES

McCormick Community Internships  | Deadline October 31, 2011
Looking to design your own community-based internship? We are looking for DePaul undergraduates who exhibit a strong commitment to service and academic excellence, and who seek to advance their understanding of community. Interns spend up to three quarters in an advanced project structured to utilize their individual talents, experiences and academic expertise. The internship is focused on project-based work designed by the student in partnership with a community partner, culminating with the generation of a final product. Interns present their projects at the Service Speaks conference in May 2012. A stipend of $1,200 per academic quarter is offered for up to three terms. Please visit steans.depaul.edu/students/serviceopportunities/mccormick.asp for more information or to apply.

The Conference is co-hosted by Illinois Campus Compact (ILCC), DePaul University (DPU), Loyola University of Chicago (LUC), National Louis University (NLU), Columbia College Chicago (CCC), and Northern Illinois University (NIU). More information at researchslice.org.