



Featured Service-Learning Course:
CMN U533: Consultation Skills with Professor Elise Dallimore
The Benefits of Service-Learning Partnerships

When I began teaching the senior capstone course for organizational communication students, I wanted my students to have a real consulting experience. As an early adopter and advocate of service-learning, I hoped to construct this experience in such a way as to also promote civic engagement and social responsibility. In 2004, my Consultation Skills class began a partnership with hopeFound (formerly known as the Friends of Shattuck Shelter). Their task was to revise, administer and analyze an employee-satisfaction survey in order to help management better assess and address the needs of employees. This was done with the hope that the findings and recommendations generated by my students would aid the organization in its efforts to recruit and retain employees and, in doing so, better meet the needs of its clients. This assignment has grown into a 5-year collaboration in which multiple student groups have built on the work of their peers as they have continued to help hopeFound address its long-term strategic plan and to better meet its identified goals.

In response to students' consulting work, hopeFound has incorporated recommendations related to improving staff recruitment and retention; addressing professional development and advancement opportunities; increasing staff diversity; addressing compensation, workload and workspace issues; and implementing strategies for enhanced communication between employees and management. These issues were identified through students' consulting work and recommendations were outlined for hopeFound through student research and analysis.

This project has resulted in clear benefits for both hopeFound and for my students. Some of the community benefits include access to expertise in communication consulting, an improved relationship with and access to NU resources and the opportunity for the organization to recruit and nurture students as potential volunteers, interns, co-ops, employees, advocates or donors.

Human Resource Director Jeanne O'Connell noted the value of this collaboration for her organization in a letter of appreciation for my students' work. She stated:



"the spirit of collaboration and level of communications expertise you bring to the S-L Consultations projects has made a positive difference in supporting the work of our employees as they provide service for homeless men and women in the Boston area." Jeanne O'Connell, Hope Found

Some of the benefits for my students include the ability to make sense of and apply otherwise difficult theory, to learn from classmates' experiences through class discussion, presentations, recommendations, etc. and to gain hands-on skills students can use in both their academic and professional lives.

One end-of-semester comment from TCEP feedback (and reflective of what I have heard from countless students since 2004) is that the "S-L projects provided experience that no case study could provide." Further, a former student reported being hired into her first post-graduate job specifically due to her work on the Consultation Skills project.

I feel proud to know that my students continue to provide consulting work for a local non-profit organization that would otherwise be unable to afford consulting services. This is especially important to me because hopeFound contributes to the Boston community by providing vital service for homeless men and women by: offering food and shelter; mental health, alcohol and substance abuse counseling; and securing permanent housing for the homeless. My students come to understand what it means to be a consultant by doing actual consulting work and further learn what civic engagement can look and feel like. Further, they benefit as this experience has worked to enhance these students' co-op and employment opportunities. Further, it allows me to feel like I am helping to facilitate learning that makes a difference in the community and in the lives of others.

Written by Elise Dallimore