Integrating Pro Bono Consulting into Online Business Courses

Abstract

Online instruction has redefined higher education and traditional students' community service has barely adapted to this change. Few colleges and universities offer online students the opportunity to be engaged in community service. Without borders, e-service learning responds to this limitation. Online courses that include a service-learning component are now transforming traditional community service, student engagement, and the online learning landscape. Using the example of a real e-service learning initiative in a Human Resources graduate course, this article presents a thorough guide for successful implementation, best practices, and it highlights the benefits of e-service learning/consulting for students, faculty, clients, and universities.

Keywords: Service-learning, Online Education, Consulting

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Traditional community service in higher education has shown to benefit the parties involved in the process. That is, students enhance their civic engagement and/or learning; Community partners benefit from the students' skills and knowledge; Instructors fulfill their service requirement; And universities build community relations and meet their community service strategic goals. However, such a face-to-face service-learning approach is maladapted to the increasing demand for online education. As they switch to online platforms, many professors abandon their service-learning efforts. By removing geographical limitations, e-service-learning holds the potential to transform service-learning and online learning while enhancing student and university engagement. If online learning is the way of the future, so is e-service-learning.

Service-Learning and e-Service Learning

Service-learning partly evolved from Dewey's (1916, 1939) theory of "learning by doing". In an educational context, service-learning bridges theory and practice, allowing students to apply knowledge and skills they already have and those acquired while enrolled in a credit-bearing course. As Bringle and Hatcher (1996) suggest, students "gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 222). It is organized learning through active participation that meets community needs (Perkins, 1994).

E-service-learning occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online. For example, students in an online human resources class might help create an employee handbook for a nonprofit community partner. As such, e-service-learning overlaps to some degree with the concept of service-

eLearning, which was explored by Dailey-Hebert, Donnelli-Sallee, and DiPadova-Stocks (2008). They describe service-eLearning as "an integrative pedagogy that engages learners through technology in civic inquiry, service, reflection and action" (p. 1).

Why e-Service Learning?

Online learning has grown significantly in the last decade and e-service learning addresses the growing demand for flexibly delivered online courses and programs. The average annual growth rate of online enrollments in the United States between 2003 and 2009 was nearly 20% in higher learning institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2009). In 2010, 63% of all traditional schools agreed that online education was critical to their future class offerings. According to Allen and Seaman (2010), the growth of the online student body has exceeded the growth of on-site students, with a 21% increase in online enrollment versus a less than 2% increase in on-site enrollment from 2008 to 2009. A 2014 survey by the Babson Survey Research Group reveals that the number of higher education students taking at least one distance education course in 2014 was up 3.7 percent from the previous year, stating that online education is no longer an institutional accessory. Online enrollment growth far exceeded that of overall higher education. Additionally, exclusively distance education students are a growing segment of the overall student population. In the fall of 2013, they comprised 12.5% of all U.S. higher education students. In parallel, higher education institutions aim at meeting the demands of organizations to prepare a highly skilled workforce. Involving students in community service related to their field of study helps meet these demands.

In parallel to the increasing number of online students, a 2015 UNC Engagement Report indicates that, "state-serving university entities touch millions of citizens and help

thousands of community groups and businesses annually. Continuing education programs brings university expertise to hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians annually, both face-to-face and online". Although specific to North Carolina, these statements can apply nationwide.

Bridging online education and meeting the demand to serve the community may sound incompatible. In fact, despite the increasing online learning trend, the pace of growth of service-learning offerings online has not kept pace with the growth of the online student population. Because few schools or instructors are using e-service-learning, the vast majority of online students do not receive the benefits of service-learning. Dailey-Hebert et al. (2008) suggest that a movement to electronic-service-learning may force some service-learning practitioners to abandon their service-learning endeavors if they cannot transition successfully online. In an exhaustive review of relevant literature exploring the empirical overlap between service-learning pedagogy and the practice/facilitation of online-learning, Waldner et al. (2012) determined that e-service-learning where 100% of the learning and activities occur online has not been rigorously investigated to date. This paper aims at filling this gap by providing a Case Study that exemplifies successful e-service learning integration into an online graduate course in Human Resources.

Review of the Literature

e-Service-Learning Typology

Traditional service learning, with both the instruction and service on site, is relatively well studied and understood. Extreme e-service-learning, however, where 100% of both the instruction and the service take place online (Waldner, McGorry, &

Widener, 2010), is the least used and the least rigorously studied form of service learning. Waldner, McGorry and Widener (2012)'s typology provides a starting point for characterizing different forms of service learning (see Figure 1). Their literature review identifies four types of e-service-learning: Hybrid Type I (service fully on site with teaching fully online), Hybrid Type II (service fully online with teaching fully on site), Hybrid Type III (a blended format with instruction and service partially online and partially on site), and Type IV, extreme e-service-learning (100% of the instruction and service online). Users should be sensitive to these differences among the four types, because each type features different products, partners, and limitations.
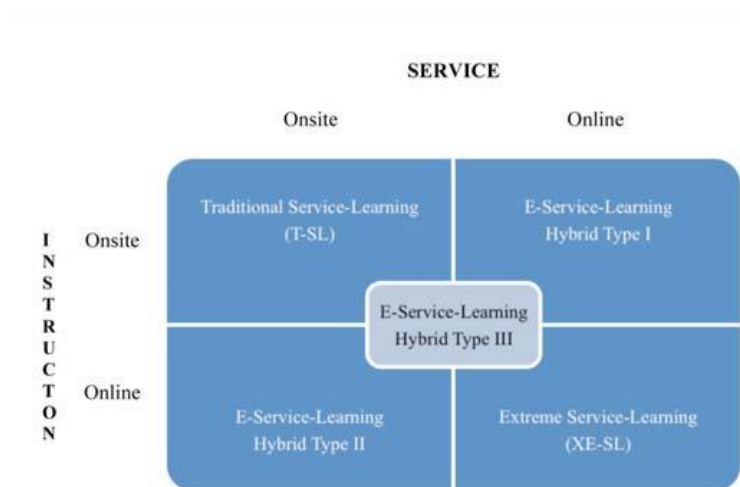

Figure 1. Types of e-service-learning (Waldner et al., 2012)

In Hybrid Type I, instruction is fully online and the service takes place onsite by scheduling specific meetings days at the community partner's location.

In Hybrid Type II, instruction is onsite but the service-learning takes place online. Projects that fit this Type include building online resources for a community partner (a

client) such as the design of a website or the development of online communities (email mailing list, chat rooms, etc.).

In Hybrid Type III, parts of the instruction and the service may take place both online and face-to-face. For instance, students may meet with the community service client but may follow-up and deliver the service online, as in Killian's (2004) experiment to develop grant proposals and best practices. Blackwell (2008) combined in-person experience with the client and both online and face-to-face teaching. Credit for the course was earned by attending the in-person meetings, by onsite volunteering, and by fulfilling the online course requirements. Another example of this Hybrid III approach would be taking a hybrid course and in-person contact hours with organizations. Alternatively, a Hybrid III approach could consist of a first meeting with the client with follow-up communication, online course management, and product development taking place online.

Finally, in Hybrid Type IV, both instruction and service-learning take place online. Waldner et al. (2010; 2012) called this approach "Extreme Service-Learning". In a healthcare course, Malvey, Hamby, and Fottler (2006) used this approach to develop human resources policies for a nonprofit acute care facility. Students first assessed the need of the organization, reviewed its existing policies, and subsequently developed revised policies and procedures for the management to review. Other service-learning projects for a Hybrid IV approach could include developing marketing and advertising materials, a website, writing of a grant, or creating a zero-based budget for organizations in varied industries (Hunter, 2007; Waldner, Roberts, Widener, & Sullivan, 2011). In all cases, the students' work is connected to solving real-world organizational issues.

Each approach (traditional and hybrids) is geared towards a specific teaching orientation (online, hybrid or in-class), the service type (such as in-person volunteering or developing a website) and the student profile (such as traditional on-campus students and professional, nontraditional students with limited time and far from a campus). Hybrid Type IV (teaching and service entirely online with some interactive, real-time calls between the client, the students and the faculty) is best suited for short-term projects that require no physical interactions with the client but may require more advanced knowledge in a specific domain (in human resources policies, procedures, and employment law, for instance). As such, the service-learning experience may be considered a professional development opportunity, which a student can list in his or her curriculum vitae.

Benefits of e-Service-Learning

Service-learning has shown to benefit students, the community partners, the participating faculty members, and the university itself. Some scholars have identified positive impacts on academic learning (Astin & Sax, 1998); the ability to apply knowledge in practical settings (Kendrick, 1996); and the enhancement of students' engagement, critical analysis, educational and professional goals and competencies (Eyler & Giles, 1999), Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray's (2001) literature review found numerous additional benefits, including personal outcomes, such as moral development or enhanced personal efficacy and leadership skills (Astin & Sax, 1998), and social outcomes, such as a sense of social responsibility (Mabry, 1998), commitment to service (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and increased community involvement after graduation (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

Others have found enhanced relationships with the institution, including stronger faculty relationships, as well as improved student satisfaction and increased student retention (Astin & Sax, 1998). Service-learning has the necessary components to generate learning opportunities that spark interest and curiosity, have a clearly defined collaborator (partner), and provide a context that demands quality and sustained effort over a duration of time (Perry, 2011). These components have long been recognized as essential conditions for high quality learning (Dewey, 1939; Kuh, 2008). Service-learning as a pedagogy can positively influence student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008) and students' understanding of a course's academic content, application of civic/community engagement, and connection to personal growth (Perry, 2011, Clayton & Day, 2004; Eyler et al., 2001).

Emerging research has also sought to identify the connection between career preparedness and professional development as explicit outcomes associated with service-learning in the classroom (Perry & Perry, under review). Astin and Sax (2008) have found that it enhances career development. Many of the outcomes attributed to service-learning are connected to the identified demands of 21st century workplaces (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012). In their review of the relevant literature exploring the empirical overlap between service-learning pedagogy and the practice/facilitation of online-learning, Waldner et al. (2012) determined that extreme e-service-learning can support professional development. For example, learning how to navigate project-based approaches to learning within an online environment, professional spaces can serve as an excellent professional development opportunity for students preparing for life after college.

The community benefits are often linked to the community partner satisfaction, and the development of useful products or services (Killian, 2004). Such satisfaction can enhance community relationships (Driscoll et al., 1996). Finally, benefits for faculty include higher satisfaction with the quality of student learning (Berson & Younkin, 1998) and commitment to research (Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, & Kerrigan, 1996). Service-learning also provides an avenue for meaningful discipline-based faculty service.

Access. As Strait and Sauer (2004) note, "Because online students tend not to be the traditional age of on-campus students and usually work a 40-hour week in addition to going to school, access to a community partner can be a challenge" (p. 1). Access to a community partner becomes a moot point in an online environment when the service-learning component occurs online. E-service-learning also has the advantage of reaching to populations that otherwise may be unable to participate in a service-learning activity, such as the disabled (Malvey, Hamby, & Fottler, 2006), rural populations, those without a higher education learning institution nearby (Strait & Hamerlinck, 2010), or those who tend to be introverted individuals (Seifer & Mihalynuk, 2005). When freed of geographic-based constraints, e-service-learning might include regional, national, or even global partners for service projects (Malvey et al., 2006).

e-Service-learning to overcome online learning limitations. Online learning is often beleaguered by a perceived lack of student interaction and engagement (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Muirhead, 2004; Swan, 2002). For example, Conrad and Donaldson (2004) found that success in online courses demands students be engaged in order to capitalize upon the learning opportunity and to solidify student learning of concepts. In other words, students cannot simply log in to an online service-

learning course and read, or log in and listen to audio files. The instructor must utilize course management software features effectively to actively engage students in the learning process and to engage students to collaborate with other students. E-service-learning responds to that limitation. In fact, Bennett and Green (2001) add that service-learning and online instruction can have a "symbiotic educational relationship" (p. 491) because an online course allows many individuals who could not (or chose not to) otherwise come to class to engage in service-learning. As this paper's case study demonstrates, e-consulting without borders allows to reach more organizations and students that may otherwise be left out of community service engagement. It addresses the "lack of opportunity to practice and demonstrate knowledge and skills, lack of opportunities to process these practical experiences with course instructors, and access to evaluate feedback as course material is transferred to practical application." Bennett and Green (2001) further note that, "These perceived weaknesses may actually become course strengths when online instruction is combined with service-learning" (p. 497).

Case Study

Integrating e-service learning in an online Master of Science in HR course at Western Carolina University (a University of North Carolina Campus)

This field case was written by the author with the cooperation of students and clients who experienced the events described in the case. Is it based on extensive interviews and the information contained in this case is known best to insiders in the consulting process (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994). While the case writer is the creator of the online consulting process, events are related in an accurate and fair manner.

In the online Master's degree in Human Resources program (MSHR) at Western Carolina University, students work as human resources consultants for an array of nonprofit organizations, small businesses, and local government agencies at no cost. Since the program is 100% online, the pro bono consulting work is integrated in a course as a team project and is delivered 100% remotely. Most of the organizations served cannot afford to hire in-house HR personnel or pay for an HR consultant. Led by a faculty member, teams of MSHR students provide these organizations with needed HR policies and programs that aim at increasing organizational effectiveness. These consulting projects are a required course assignment, which give the online students a unique field experience opportunity to apply the concepts they learn in their courses with real organizations. In particular, the consulting projects challenge students to engage in critical thinking to analyze clients' consulting needs, work collaboratively as a team to develop client solutions, and engage in effective written and oral communications with team members and clients. As of December 2016, a total of 432 graduate students have participated in this initiative, delivering 111 HR consulting projects for 60 organizations in 8 states. Table 1 presents a list of some of the organizations served and Graph 1 presents an infographics summarizing the e-consulting activity as of August 2016. The nonprofit, for-profit organizations and government agencies vary in industry (healthcare, education, children's welfare, animal shelters, cities, etc.), in workforce size (from 2 to over 1,500 employees or volunteers), and in location (FL, GA, IL, NC, PA, SC, TN, VA).

Table 1.

Selected List of Organizations Helped Through the e-consulting model at Western Carolina University

Names and Locations of the Client Organizations

Alexander Youth Network	Charlotte, NC
Arden Theater Company	Philadelphia, PA
Art Sphere	Philadelphia, PA
Asheville Buncombe Community Relations Council	Asheville, NC
Asheville City Schools Foundation	Asheville, NC
Autism Tennessee	Nashville, TN
Big Brother Big Sister	High Point, NC
City of Morganton	Morganton, NC
Community Table	Asheville, NC
Council on Aging of Buncombe County	Asheville, NC
Dogwood Alliance	Asheville, NC
Farm to Home Milk	Asheville, NC
Girl Scouts	Asheville, NC
Green Opportunities	Asheville, NC
Habitat for Humanity	Asheville, NC; Gwinnett, GA
Homeward Bound	Asheville, NC
Humane Society	Asheville, NC
Jewish Community Center	Asheville, NC
Lake Junaluska Retreat Center	Lake Junaluska, NC
L'Ecole de Choix	Chicago, IL
Mohawk Industries	3 cities, NC
Safe Harbor	Greenville, SC
Surry Community College	Dobson, NC
The Alliance for AIDS Services - Carolina	Asheville, NC
The Arch of Southside	Danville, VA
The Charles House Association	Carrboro, NC
Town of Canton,	Canton, NC
University of South Florida,	Tampa, FL
Western North Carolina AIDS Project	Asheville, NC
YMCA	High Point; Asheville, NC
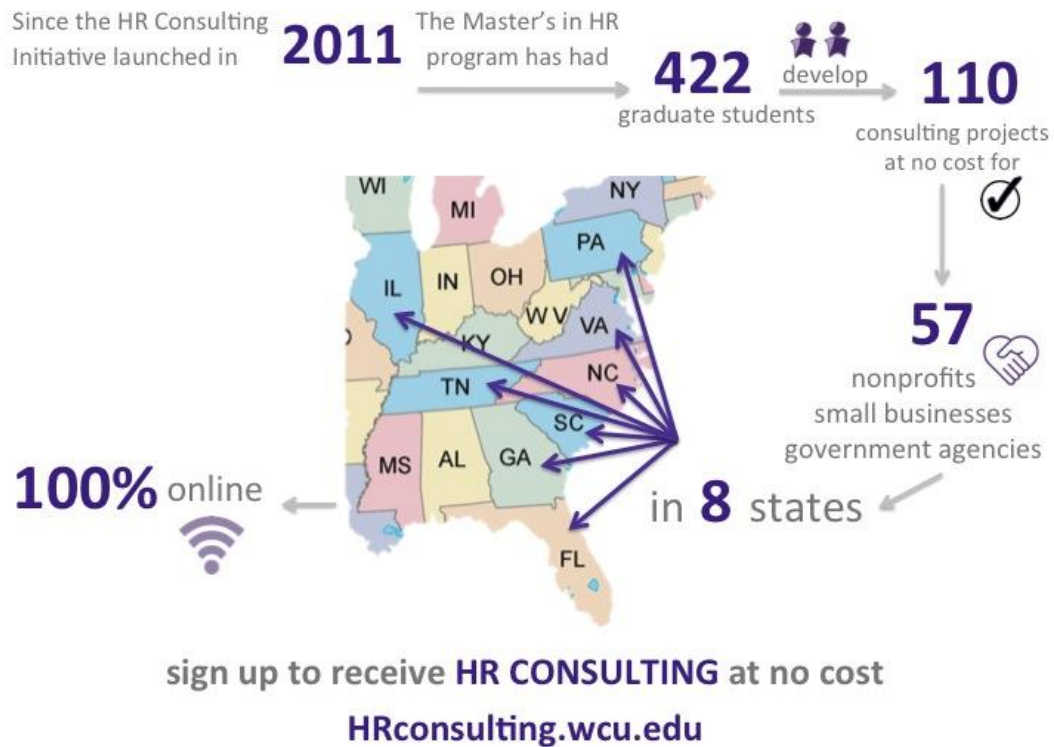
Graph 1. Infographics, online Master of Science in HR, Western Carolina University

Description of the Online Consulting Model

Figure 2 shows the consulting model currently used for our online pro bono consulting projects.
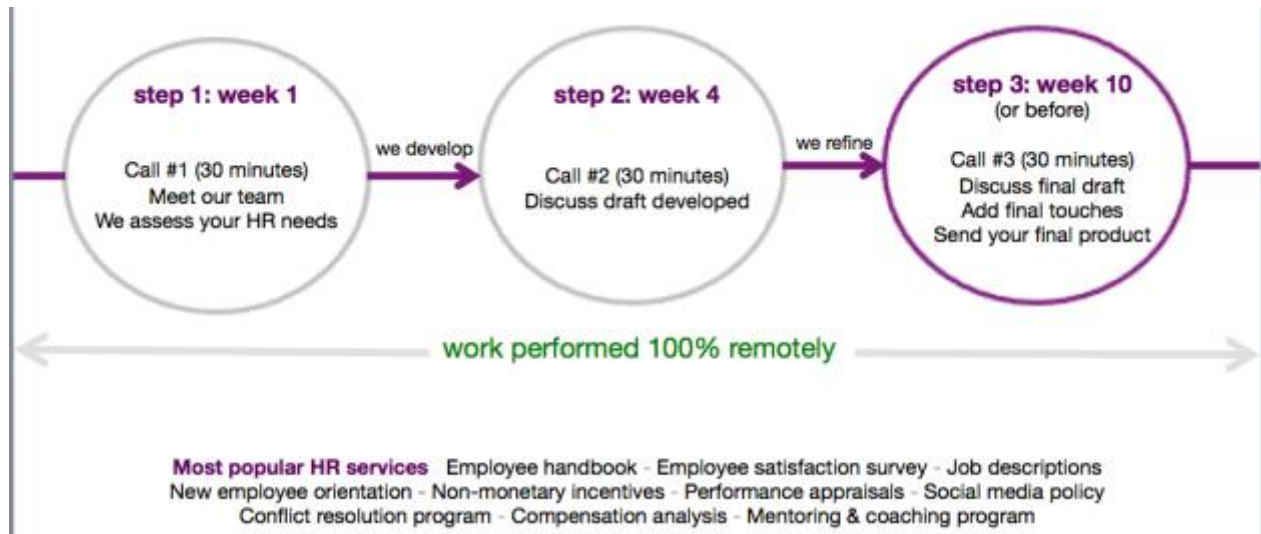
Figure 2. E-consulting Model: 3 steps in 10 weeks

From Online Student Teams Formation to Consulting Project Delivery

The projects are developed over a period of 10 weeks. During a typical, 16-week semester, this leaves a 6-week buffer for team formation and additional assistance to the client once the project is completed, should it be needed. The buffer also allows for an effective closure with the consulting client and for a post-assessment about the service rendered. All teams of HR student-consultants follow a 3-step consulting model, which the author has developed and fine-tuned over the years consulting with students in an online environment. One of the goals of the 3-step model is to maximize work processes while minimizing contact time with the client who is often focused on his/her efforts to fulfil the mission of her organization. Through a Project Manager, the team and the client schedule one conference call at each step of the consulting process. In between calls, the team develops the project.

Step 1. At step one, a first "Meet and Greet" call is scheduled (Call 1). Ideally, all calls should start and end on time and should not last more than 30 minutes unless more

time is warranted. This prevents client fatigue and enhances the likelihood that the client will commit to attending all conference calls.

This initial call between all parties should occur no later than week 2 of the semester (the week after the teams are formed). The goal of the first call is for all parties to get to know each other and for the student-consultants to gain an in-depth understanding of client's HR needs by asking questions to the client. By the end of the call, students should have enough information to start their consulting work. This call is quite crucial to build a trusting relationship with the client (Germain & McGuire, 2014; McGorry, 2006), for teams to establish credibility, and to clarify expectations and timelines for all parties.

If the Team needs more information from the client after Call 1, emails can be exchanged. To prevent excess and repetition, these emails should be channeled though the Project Manager. The team then develops a draft of the HR product. At week 5, if not before, the team should have a draft of the HR project to present to the client.

Step 2. At week 5, through the Project Manager, each team schedules a second call (Call 2) with the client to present the draft. Ideally, the draft should be sent to the client a few days prior to the call for the client to review and prepare feedback. Presenting a draft ensures that what the team develops addresses the client's specific needs. It also helps build and sustain the relationship with the client. Teams use the feedback provided during this Call 2 to refine and finish their HR consulting project.

Step 3. At week 10 or before, a third and final conference call (Call 3) is scheduled. The team of HR student-consultants presents their final HR project to the

client. It then makes any necessary final changes based on the client's feedback and the

Project Manager submits the finished project to the client.

If multiple e-consulting projects are developed simultaneously, the faculty

member should consider selecting a student in the course who serves as a Project

Manager. He or she serves as the liaison between the student-consultant teams, the

faculty member, and the nonprofit/small business client. We also recommend that each

team of students elects a team leader who reports to the Project Manager. This prevents

duplication of communication and efforts. Graph 3 shows how the team of students, the

project manager, the faculty member, and the nonprofit director/business owner interact

throughout the 10-week long consulting process.

After Call 1, the faculty member typically takes a "backstage" role, ensures that students

progress with their work, provides advice to the student teams as needed, attends Calls 2

and 3, and reviews the draft and final HR products the teams create.

Participants: Online Degree Programs, Online Students, and Client Organizations

Figure 3 provides a visual synopsis of the participants in the e-service-learning / e-

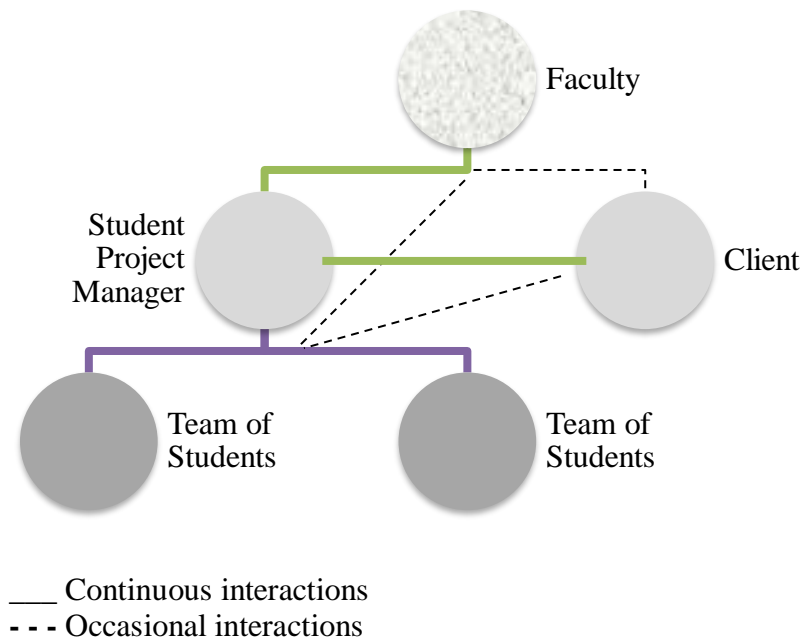consulting model and an interaction chart.

___ Continuous interactions
- - - Occasional interactions

Figure 3. Participants in the e-consulting model and interactions

Online degree programs. Although the consulting model has been used for HR-

related projects, it has shown to be flexible in the type of courses where it can be used,

the types of projects developed, and the industry and size of the organizations helped.

Because it is adaptable, the consulting model presented in Figure 2 can be used in other

academic programs and for varied consulting projects, such as the development of a

marketing plan for a small business, a construction consulting project, or a nutrition plan

for a school.

As an example, the University of North Carolina system has a total of 45 possible

programs in which this initiative could be replicated, 14 of which at the master's level.

Here is a selected sample of degree programs in which the online consulting model could

be used:

- UNC Greensboro - Master of Science in IT and Management - Fully online
- UNC Wilmington - Master of Science in Instructional Technology - Fully online
- NC State University - Master of Science in Training and Development - Fully online

- NC State University - Master of Science in Nutrition - Fully online
- NCA&T - Bachelor of Science in Business Education - Fully online
- ECU - Bachelor of Science in Operations and Supply Chain Mgt. - fully online
- ECU - Master of Science in Construction Management - Fully online
- ECU - Bachelor of Science in Business Administration - Fully online
- Appalachian State University - Bachelor of Science in Management - Fully online

Online students. As mentioned earlier in this paper, to date, 432 MSHR online students have served as pro bono online consultants. Students can be enrolled in any degree programs where skills and learning goals can be translated into a project for a "real" organization.

Client organizations (nonprofits, small businesses, and government agencies). Over the past 11 semesters, over 60 organizations in 8 states have benefited from this online consulting initiative. This represents close to 9,000 of pro bono consulting hours (432 students times 20 hours each). Since the consulting is delivered entirely online (Type IV in the e-service learning typology), the geographic location of the organizations is irrelevant. So is the size of the organizations or the industry they are in.

Discussion

Benefits of e-service learning to the university and administration, faculty, project manager, team leaders and students, and the clients

Table 2 presents an overview of the benefits of the e-consulting initiative.

Table 2.

Benefits of the e-consulting initiative at Western Carolina University

University and Administration	- Service-learning (community service as a strategic goal) - Engage students (enrolled and alumni) - Internship placement tool - Student learning tool (practice of theories learned in course) - Job placement tool

	- Great PR, publicity, and marketing tool - Engage alumni (future donations)
Faculty	- Professionally and personally fulfilling. Do well. Do good! - Service the community - Innovative teaching (especially online)
Project Manager Student enrolled in course or program	- Experience as Project Manager --a resume builder - Create business relationships with clients (can lead to job) - Get credit for the course they are taking - A resume builder - Get a feel for what consulting is like - Can lead to a job - Use student talent to help the community. Do well. Do good!
Internship & Student job seeker	- e-Consulting as internship to complete a degree - Internship can lead to a permanent job - A resume-builder (gain consulting work experience) - Get a feel for what consulting is like - Use student talent to help the community. Do well. Do good!

HR/HRD
Professional and
Alumni Student
	- Stay connected to the HR/HRD field (great for retired
	  professionals or job seekers)
	- Use professional experience and talent to help the
	  community. Do well. Do good!
	- A resume-builder & networking tool
	- Get a feel for what consulting is like
	- Corporate Social Responsibility for employers by serving as
	  HR/HRD mentors to students or by participating in the
	  consulting itself

Benefits to the Client Organization	- Receives high quality HR consulting at no cost - Becomes more efficient as an organization - Strengthens legal compliance with HR policies - Gets organization known (press release) - Potential for further collaboration (consulting, volunteer recruitment, employee recruitment, grants)

University and Administration

Universities that aim to serve their community and region are increasingly integrating service-learning as one of their strategic goals. In addition to demonstrating social responsibility, service-learning may bring in grant money and generate publicity (visibility through the media). It may also be used as a marketing tool to demark a university from other, competing higher education institutions. The university can claim that its student population, whether currently enrolled or alumni, on-campus or online, graduate or undergraduate, is engaged. Further, keeping alumni students engaged has shown to generate donations. It can also help students with internship and job placement, as a student may land a job as a result of an e-service learning project. Finally, the university can position itself as a leader in innovating teaching that incorporates applications of the theoretical knowledge acquired in courses.

Faculty

In addition to fulfilling their university and community service requirement, faculty members may benefit from more student engagement. Also, they may be recognized by their department and university for incorporating innovative teaching strategies into their courses, especially in an online environment. Finally, facilitating e-service learning projects can be very intrinsically rewarding for faculty members. In addition to helping students develop and organizations be more efficient and productive, the experience can generate a deep sense of self-fulfillment, both at the professional and at the personal levels. They "do well" and they "do good", as do their students.

Project Manager / Student enrolled in the Course or Program

The project manager role may aid the senior student build his or her communication and negotiation skills and ultimately his or her resume. Also, through the ongoing communication with the clients, the project manager networks and may develop business relationships that may lead referrals or jobs.

Team leaders/Student enrolled in course or program at one or more universities/campuses

In addition to earning credit for the course they are taking, students can build their resume. The e-consulting provides a hands-on service-learning experience, which challenges students to grow in a number of important competencies, such as: Work in a virtual team environment; digital literacy using online-based tools; effective collaboration and communication with peers and with outside companies; professionalism; ethical decision-making; human resources consultation skills; client relationship management; project management skills; subject-matter experience, and critical thinking skills. All of these competency areas have been shown to be essential to post-graduation success and in high demand in today's global workplace. Several students from the Case Study presented in this paper secured HR management jobs as a result of their consulting experience. Finally, students consistently find the experience personally fulfilling. They enjoy working for a real organization (and earn course credits for it) and they enjoy "doing good" (see Student feedback in the next section).

Benefits to the Client Organization

One of the main benefits to the client is the no cost, high quality HR service it receives. The product is developed by a team of students who often have both theoretical and practical knowledge about human resources and is supervised by a faculty member who often has a terminal degree in the HR field and/or industry experience. Regardless of

the project developed (whether it is a revised employee handbook, an employee

performance evaluation system, a salary analysis, or an onboarding process), the service

rendered allows the nonprofit or the small business to increase its efficiency. In some

cases where the HR consulting project is the creation or the revisions of an Employee

Policy Manual, the business also becomes legally compliant.

Finally, the e-service-learning experience may be a promotional tool for the organization.

A nonprofit gets the opportunity to promote its mission through the students. It may also

be featured in a press release that the faculty may write at the end of the semester. Above

all, it allows the business owners to focus on what is most important to them: fulfilling

their organization's mission.

Other Possible Beneficiaries of the HR e-Consulting Initiative

       Business professionals and alumni students. Alumni of the Master's in HR

program have shown a great interest in continuing to serve in pro bono consulting

projects after graduation, either as team members or mentors. For those who are job

seekers, it may help them fill the unemployment gap while networking and staying

connected to their field. For alumni who are employed, the e-service-learning opportunity

may become an opportunity to create a university-industry partnership as many

organizations offer their employees paid time to volunteer for nonprofit organizations.

This may serve as an avenue to strengthen Corporate Social Responsibility. Counting on

alumni students to serve also increases the pool of business consultants who can serve in

the e-consulting initiative. Finally, from an alumni relations' perspective, it may lead to

donations to the university.

Internship and student job seekers. In the Master's in HR program, students have the option to complete their end-of-program internship hours by carrying an e-consulting project solo (rather than as a team). This may aid program directors in the recruiting of students who work full-time. Internship students may list this experience as a professional consulting experience on their resume. This also adds to the available pool of students who can serve in the e-consulting initiative.

Students', Client-organizations', and Faculty Satisfaction with the e-Service Learning Experience

The client satisfaction with the HR e-consulting projects they received has been documented in several press releases written by the faculty at the end of each semester. Such testimonials help build credibility and can be used as promotional material. For instance, upon completion of a project in May 2015, the Town Manager of Canton, NC, shared that,

> "*WCU's HR consulting team helped the Town of Canton execute a pay study to make our organization more competitive in the regional market. The students, under the guidance of a volunteer HR professional, were able to compile and analyze a tremendous amount of data in short order and ultimately produced a tangible new pay-plan that we hope to enact. Looking beyond compensation, the students challenged us to consider other measures that may increase retention and employee satisfaction. The partnership with WCU gave Canton a professional-grade product at no cost and exemplifies the university's commitment to serving as a relevant resource to surrounding communities.*"

In their end-of-semester course evaluations and in their reflection paper about their experience consulting, students have overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction being online pro bono consultants. The following quotes were extracted from a final, required Reflection Paper, which students submit in their online BlackBoard course at the

conclusion of each consulting project. The paper requires that they reflect on the "lessons learned" from their online field experience.

Quote from Student A:

> *"As I near graduation in a couple of weeks, I think back on my experience in the MSHR program. Without question, my most enjoyable memories and learning experiences have come from my work with non-profits. It's not just because of the practical experience, but the work itself has significant meaning as we help organizations whose mission is to help others. In essence, we are not only giving back to the non-profit, but we are giving back to those whom they serve. I want to thank you, Dr. (XYZ), for giving us such a unique and worthwhile opportunity, and I wish you and your future students continued success."*

Quote from Student B:

> *"Not only did it allow me to actively participate in assisting a non-profit organization, it provided a life example for many things that we were reading in the text. I felt that this was one of the most successful learning experiences I have had since starting the MSHR program and feel that I have not only completed a class assignment, but also grown as an HR professional."*

Plan for Long-term Sustainability

As previously mentioned, the e-consulting initiative presented in the Case Study has a proven record of success. In the past five years, a total of 111 HR consulting projects have been delivered to over 60 nonprofits, small businesses and local government agencies, representing a project completion rate of 100 percent. These projects have involved over 432 Master's in HR students. It should be noted that having faculty oversee more than a few projects a semester while carrying a full teaching load, a research agenda and other academic responsibilities is not a sustainable long-term plan unless they are given adequate resources or/and a course release. The more support is provided, the faster the initiative can grow, and the better suited it is to address the demands from the nonprofits or small businesses. Creating a permanent Graduate

Assistant or Project Manager and Consulting Director positions could aid in providing the e-service-learning initiative long-term stability and success.

Cost of the e-Service-Learning Initiative

If the project manager is recruited from the current student base, the cost of running an e-consulting initiative is minimal to null. Ideally, however, a faculty member who oversees more than a few projects simultaneously should be awarded a course release. As mentioned in the next section, Killian (2004) estimated that e-service learning courses may require 25% more of the instructor's time compared to traditional face-to-face service-learning. Finally, it is advised that an online collaboration and document-sharing platform be used to manage the workflow from the teams. Samepage.io offers an adequate platform at a very moderate cost (a few hundred dollars per year for a not-for-profit educational institution).

Limitations

E-service learning does have unique limitations related to communication and interactions between the consulting parties, the technology, and the added workload for the faculty member.

Establishing healthy and steady communication patterns between the teams, the clients, the project managers and the team leaders can be challenging if communication norms are not role-modeled by the faculty and if clear expectations are not set early on. An online environment can make students and clients less accountable. If a client fails to respond to a request for feedback in a timely manner, the team may stall and team morale may be affected (Hunter, 2007). Occasional synchronous sessions can alleviate this communication limitation. Scheduling conflicts between students may also slow down a

team's progress. Using Samepage's virtual chat may aid students communicate more effectively. Also, students should be reminded that traditional phone lines are available. The second limitation lies in the consulting team's heavy reliance on technology, which is increasingly dependable, nonetheless. Assuming that online students (and clients) have consistent access to and knowledge about basic software and hardware, machines occasionally malfunction, and "when technology goes awry in an e-environment, the effect is exponential" (Malvey et al., 2006, p. 192). Ensuring that all parties have access to IT support is advised. Oftentimes, professors can suggest solutions to most technology issues. Strait and Sauer (2004) recommend that faculty be comfortable to teaching online before attempting to integrate an e-service component in their courses. At minimum, clients need to have access to a phone to hold the team calls, although giving them (free) access to the online, user-friendly collaboration platform Samepage is ideal to ease communication and to prevent an excessive exchange of emails.

The third major limitation of e-service learning initiatives is the amount of time a faculty member needs to invest to carry out successful experiences for the students and superior service to the clients. In addition to identifying organizations to help, the faculty establishes contact with their executive director, explains the consulting process, sets up the collaboration platform Samepage for each team, adapts her course for full integration of the projects, attends the online team-client meetings, oversees the product development (the team projects), and it is suggested that she writes a press release at the conclusion of the semester to report the work accomplished (Waldner & Hunter, 2008). The article can be used for internal communication at the university level and it can be sent to external media outlets. The logistical work can be intense, especially in the first

semester e-service-learning is integrated into a course. Killian (2004) reports that e-service learning courses may require 25% more of the instructor's time compared to traditional face-to-face service-learning. However, the task becomes easier as she gains e-consulting experience. Students may also experience an increased workload due to the time required to attend the online meetings and the development of the product itself to meet the client's expectations.

Appropriate training can minimize many of the above challenges. Solid course design, clear expectations, and synchronous communication between all parties can alleviate many hurdles. Despite the above limitations, e-service learning opportunities can be extremely self-fulfilling for all parties. They may boost a professor's service requirement, and may be an effective promotional avenue for the University. They also allow the client to promote his company and products. And above all, the benefits of e-service learning to online students are limitless: practical application of knowledge; serving the community; learning about nonprofit management; aiding organizations that cannot afford to pay for a traditional consultants or employees; and boosting the students' resumes as they can list "co-consulting" through the University as a new skill. In essence, they do well and they do good.

The Legality of it All

A Learning Contract (through the Faculty member) signed by the client before the start of the semester (Bennett & Green, 2001) may ease discomfort regarding the confidentiality of the information shared with the students. It may also outline each party's expectations for the e-service learning activity. It can highlight the project's objectives, the required feedback and the occasional attendance expectations on calls. In

turn, the team promises to deliver the final product to the client (Hunter, 2007; Malvey et al., 2006). A Learning Contract may relieve all parties from liability. The service is, after all, an educational activity and is provided on a pro bono basis.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

This section highlights the key elements in a successful online service-learning initiative. These include the key people and their respective roles, how to optimize communication, what technology is needed, and how a course may be structured to accommodate an online service-learning component.

Before e-service can be considered for implementation, there needs to be a buy-in and support from the college or the university administration, along with a clear statement of students' competencies to be addressed. A buy-in from the university administration will not only prevent a drop in faculty morale, but it should clearly endorse and promote the initiative via internal and external channels such as newsletters.

Clear Statement of Competencies to be Addressed

Stating the students' competencies to be addressed will create goals to be reached and will give the initiative more validity. The e-service-learning initiative presented in this paper's Case Study challenges students to grow a significant number of important competencies, such as: Work in a virtual team environment; digital literacy using online-based tools; effective collaboration and communication with peers and with outside companies; professionalism; ethical decision-making; consultation skills; client relationship management; project management skills; and critical thinking. Anecdotal data from students show that they feel they have been challenged and have grown in

several of these areas. Surveys assessing student growth in each of these competencies

can help establish the e-service learning initiative's impact.

Key elements in e-service learning initiatives

Table 3 presents a breakdown of the key e-service-learning components: people,

communication, technology, and course design.

Table 3.

Key People and Their Respective Roles in e-Consulting Best Practices

People	In the organizational order: Faculty → Project Manager → Team Leader → Student Consultants → Client
Communication	- Clear timeline with specific deadlines (mid-point /project due date) - All to use Collaboration and Communication platform with all info - Use common online meeting space (such as GoToMeeting)
Technology	- Require training on using Collaboration and Communication platform (faculty, project managers, team leaders, students, clients) during the 1st week. - Clear announcement of phone call info and days/times
Course Design	- For more buy-in, let students select the nonprofit they want to help (either because of HR project or/and mission of the nonprofit) - Let students elect their team leader. One will emerge - Integration in the course grade: 40% - Require reflection paper (service-learning component); Lessons learned (connected to course objective or not) - Require paragraph about individual contributions to team project - Require paragraph about overall team assessment - Ask for students for ways to improve the consulting process

People. The e-consulting team consists of the faculty member, the project

manager (a senior student), the team leaders (elected by each student team), and the

student-consultants (who sign up for a project). The e-consulting team serves the clients (secured by the faculty member before the beginning of the semester).

Communication. For effective e-service learning, clear communication expectations should be clearly established from the very beginning of class. Between the faculty and the client, these expectations could be outlined in a simple Learning Contract, which both parties sign before the start of the semester (Bennett & Green, 2001). The use of multiple technologies has shown to be effective in communicating between all parties: TXTing, conference-calling, and emailing. TXTing is particularly effective when team members need a quick response to a question, such as setting a team online meeting day and time, or to let the team know an updated document has been posted in the collaboration platform.

Also, a clear timeline with specific deadlines (mid-point /project due date) needs to be clearly communicated to students both on BlackBoard and in the course syllabus. Faculty should consider using an online Collaboration and document-sharing platform which students and clients contribute to throughout the life of the consulting projects. For the few conference calls scheduled, a common online meeting space should be used (such as GotoMeeting.com). If a faculty member manages several simultaneous projects, it is preferable that each team creates its own GotoMeeting / Skype room to avoid double meetings in the same virtual room (often free through universities' IT departments). The faculty member should role model communication patterns (Hunter, 2007; Tabor, 2007). As such, he or she should remain actively engaged from the beginning to the end of the consulting process and maintain high visibility in discussion platforms and forums related to the projects. She should provide feedback as necessary, and attend the 3 teams-

clients phone calls. Establishing clear channels of communication between the professor and the students is essential to prevent disengagement. Faculty members should tell students that he or she checks their team-specific collaboration platforms regularly to stay informed about their progress. Faculty should comment on the students' posts as necessary.

Technology. E-service learning often requires the use of both synchronous and asynchronous tools. Synchronous tools include audio and live video streaming/teleconferencing and TXT chat rooms, when available. Asynchronous technology includes emails, online course platforms and their embedded tools (short videos, discussion boards, drop boxes), and collaborative platforms such as Samepage or SharePoint (Malvey et al., 2006; Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2010; Straight & Sauer, 2004). The combined use of technologies bridges the gap between synchronous and asynchronous technologies (Waldner, et al, 2010).

A collaboration and document management platform (such as Samepage.io) serves as "communication central" for all parties. A shell is developed for each team/client/project but basic customization with the client's logo and information is possible and recommended to make the client feel unique. The page contains all parties' contact information, a calendar with deadlines, a document upload section, and an email/live chat. Samepage also offers a free App, which allows users to access the information from different types of electronic device and to send TXT.
The link to the team-specific Samepage is emailed to all parties during the first week of class, as the teams are formed. This allows students to test their access to their webpage and to become familiar with Samepage and its options.

During the second week of class, all parties (faculty, project managers, team leaders, students, and clients, if possible) should receive online training on how to use the collaboration and communication platform. Ideally, the faculty member should have easy access to IT support. Although it is not always possible, Waldner and colleagues (2012) suggest that the University's instructional design team be a partner in the e-service learning initiative. Faculty with prior online teaching experience are preferable to avoid cognitive overload and to ensure that he/she can be of assistance to the students who may be new to e-service learning (Malvey et al. 2006). Consequently, it is preferable that the service-learning component may only be offered in advanced online courses. Also, since the teams rely heavily on technology to perform their work, enrolling clients that are also open to using technology may be a condition for receiving pro bono help (Stoecher, Hilgendorf & Tyron, 2008; Waldner et al., 2010).

Course design. Traditional service-learning practices can inform e-service learning initiatives and course design. Imperial, Perry and Katula (2007) have identified seven design principles to help facilitate success in traditional service-learning courses. These principles, which are relevant to e-service learning, include: a connection between the service activity and the learning objectives; an appropriate time commitment; faculty commitment; perceptible impacts of the activity, a student reflection paper; feedback from loops; and student input.

The e-service learning component should be clearly mentioned in the course syllabus to make students aware of the requirement as they enroll in the course. There is no pre-requisite and training required for enrolling in e-service learning courses. However, Malvey and colleagues (2006) suggest that, for optimal success, students and

instructors should have prior experience taking online courses. Therefore, an e-service-learning component may not be appropriate for introductory courses. Administrators and faculty should take this into consideration when deciding which courses should have an e-service-learning component. Additionally, if specific skills are needed to complete the e-service learning projects, students in more advanced courses may be better suited for the task.

For optimal student buy-in and continued participation, a substantial amount of the course grade should be earned through the e-service learning project. In this paper's Case Study, to total of 40% of the course grade is obtained through the e-consulting team project. Is students do not participate, they may lose 40 points and fail the course. The expected deliverables to be submitted in the course and the associated deadlines should be clearly itemized in the online course and in the syllabus. They include: First, the final team project itself. Second, a 10-slide team PowerPoint presentation to show the team's work to other teams during a virtual class meeting at the end of the semester. And third, an individually submitted self-reflection paper in which students reflect on the "lessons learned" (connected to course objective and not), what they have learned about themselves through the process, and if they would handle the project differently if they had the opportunity to work on another service-learning project. Lehman and Conceição (2010) note that self-reflection is critical to successful online learning as it enables students to understand their role in the online environment while becoming intimate with the project variables, actors, and recipients of the service-learning experience. Reflection is also an important aspect of the service-learning process because it enables students to connect thoughts and action while encouraging higher

order thinking skills such as analysis, comprehension, problem solving, and evaluation (Rama, Ravencroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000). Mills (2001) suggests that quality reflection enables students to contemplate their own experience while simultaneously building and growing community with other students in the course. He utilized web-based journaling as a medium for feedback, encouragement, and questioning. Students are engaged on a daily basis, contemplating their own thoughts and actions as well as those of others. Web-based journaling addresses students' daily experiences, empowers them to create a sense of community by developing their own creative space, and it enables the quality reflection necessary for successful service-learning.

In that same Reflection paper, students should also list their individual contributions to the team project. This encourages individual accountability for the team project and it may reduce social loafing (Lazar & Preece, 1999). Students may be prompted to report issues they encountered with specific team members (even if the problem was addressed early in the semester). Finally, students should be invited to provide feedback on the consulting process and how they think it can be improved (added 20%). The remaining 40% of course points are obtained through weekly course discussion posts (20%) and a final exam (20%).

It is important that faculty ties in the team projects to the course objectives (Wilhite & Silver, 2005) as it makes the e-consulting project relevant to the course and to the students. For more buy-in, faculty should select the clients based on their HR needs. Ideally, these needs should be linked to the course objectives.

Definition of Roles and Responsibilities

The project manager should be recruited from senior students who may have previously participated in e-consulting. At Western Carolina University, students who are about to start their end-of-program internship are invited to apply for the Project Manager position. In exchange for managing the consulting projects for no pay, the selected student is relieved from completing her 80 hours of internship in an organization. The project manager serves as the liaison between the team leaders, the faculty member, and the client. This streamline process prevents repetitive emails from the team members to the faculty and to the client. Through this process, students learn to report to a leader and team leaders learn to manage a team.

The professor should post each available project in the online course before the start of the semester. For each available project, he or she should include a blurb describing the organization that is seeking HR consulting, along with a description of the product each team will work on. During the first week of the semester, students select a project on a first-come, first served basis. The choice of project can increase a buy-in from the student. This choice is often based on either the student's own HR expertise and confidence in meeting the client's needs, or an affinity between the student's personal values and preferences for the nonprofit's or small business's cause and mission. Once enough students sign up for a specific team project (we recommend three to five students per team), the team is formed and the students elect their team leader. Also during the first week of class, through the online course discussion board, students learn about each other's skills, abilities, and about their prior HR experience (or lack thereof). This allows them to develop team trust and identify everyone's strengths. Some students have years or prior HR experience while others may have strong team leadership

skills. The assignment instructions should outline the project's expectations and roles, the deliverables, the deadlines, and how often students are expected to communicate with the client.

Metrics of Success

Every semester, success of the e-consulting initiative presented in the Case Study is measured both quantitatively and qualitatively with three indicators: First, the reported number of organizations served and the consulting projects completed; Second, the students' individual qualitative feedback about their experience serving as online pro bono consultants and the specific competencies they believe they acquired (digital literacy, written communication, virtual teamwork, consulting, client relationship management, project management, critical thinking, etc.); And third, the collection of testimonials from the organizations helped.

Appropriate assessment instruments should be developed to measure outcomes – from students' competencies to clients' satisfaction with the HR service provided. In fact, further research is needed to better understand e-service-learning outcomes. Malvey et al. (2006) note that e-service-learning students "will likely miss out on the spontaneity and excitement of events by not being physically onsite" (p. 191). If students conduct their service online, do they indeed miss out on critical networking, organizational dynamics, and other learning experiences available to students conducting their service physically on site? Although their concern is legitimate, data supporting this claim are not yet available. Future research studies should also consider comparing the outcomes of e-service-learning to those in traditional service-learning experiences, especially in areas related to performance differences in learning outcomes, civic engagement, and professional development. Researchers should explore the calculation

of an e-service learning initiative's return on investment. This may help institutions make informed decisions about integrating an e-service learning component into online courses and curricula. Finally, researchers should further investigate how to optimize an e-service learning implementation across courses, departments, colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad.

Conclusion

E-service-learning has shown to effectively fill the gap between traditional service-learning and online learning. It supports the research framework that focuses on the intersection of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge to emphasize new knowledge base (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Professors who can master that intersection will have more effective expertise than those whose excellence lies strictly in the content discipline, strictly in the pedagogy (e.g., service-learning), or strictly in the technology (e.g., online learning techniques). To break through the barrier and effectively transition to e-service-learning, faculty must master the relationship between content, pedagogy, and technology. Free from geographical constraints, e-service-learning adds a new dimension to online learning and promotes engagement on multiple levels and for multiple parties.

This paper presented best practices for faculty and administrators to consider when designing an e-service-learning course, which included providing training for the parties involved in the e-consulting; clarifying expectations of students and clients; scheduling meeting times to enhance communication; implementing strategies to facilitate group interaction (e.g., using a collaboration and document-sharing platform), and measuring the outcomes of the e-consulting initiative.

Nonetheless, e-service-learning activities have their own unique set of limitations. These may include the reliability of technology, possible communication breakdowns between students and organizations, and team conflict, all of which could delay the successful completion of an e-consulting project. But once faculty members have identified ways to overcome these limitations, the benefits of an e-service learning / e-consulting initiative are multileveled and its potential is limitless. Teams of students can be formed between students in a same course; between students from different disciplines on a same campus (nursing and HRD programs, for instance); between undergraduate students and graduate students (graduate students within the team may serve as mentors); and between online students located on several campuses, and even abroad (this option would be attractive to U.S. universities that use their curricula across the world). An example of this holistic approach of e-consulting would be a business school that forms e-consulting cross-functional teams for a given nonprofit organization located anywhere in the nation. A team of Operations students could develop a product, Marketing students could promote the product, and Management/HR students could develop an employee training program for that product. Entirely online.

Additionally, as successfully tested in Western Carolina University's Master in Human Resources program, e-consulting can be used as an end-of-program internship in lieu of a traditional onsite internship. This would be particularly attractive to students who cannot complete their internship hours because of their work schedule or other personal commitments.

Finally, alumni of our Master's program have shown an increased interest in serving as pro bono HR consultants after graduation. We have materialized these requests

by having alumni students lead some of the more advanced consulting projects. Creating a pool of volunteer alumni students can strengthen the ability to serve more organizations in the long term. Further, the e-consulting can serve as a alumni student engagement tool, which may lead to donations to the alma mater. Finally, universities could develop industry partnerships in which HR/HRD staff may join an online student-consultants team and mentor students who develop HR materials for a nonprofit organization. This initiative would respond to many organizations' community engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility strategies.

The marriage of online learning and service-learning is possible and it has shown to be very successful and rewarding for students, professors, the community, universities, and the client-organizations served. With e-service-learning via e-consulting, online students and their institutions experience the multi-faceted benefits of service-learning, which range from civic engagement, enhanced learning outcomes, and professional development skills. Meanwhile, professors enhance their own service portfolio, universities reap the benefit of positive representation in the community nationwide and abroad (and meet their strategic goals) and enhance current and alumni engagement, and clients receive a service they may not otherwise be able to afford. With its low cost and its high, collective impact, e-consulting has a promising future in the realms of higher education.

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