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# Encouraging Student Participation In Social Entrepreneurship Opportunities

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# Encouraging Student Participation In Social Entrepreneurship Opportunities

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## **AC 2007-2081: ENCOURAGING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP OPPORTUNITIES**

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W. ANDREW CLARK is a nutritional biochemist with diverse experience in academics and industrial research. He received his Ph.D. in Nutrition from North Carolina State University in 1980 and served as Assistant Professor of Nutrition at South Dakota State University (1980 to 1983). From 1983 to 2001 he held various positions in research, management and business at Eastman Chemical Company. Dr. Clark is an Associate Professor of Entrepreneurial Business at East Tennessee State University.

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PETER HRISO received his MFA from The Ohio State University in 1994 with an emphasis in Computer Graphics and Animation. He has been involved in all areas of digital media production including accident reconstruction, visualization, multimedia, and web development. His job titles and responsibilities have varied from animator, project manager, multimedia programmer and web developer. His main role has always been to bridge the gap between design and technology. Peter has worked with industrial, corporate and education clients including: Compaq, Ford, Daimler Chrysler, VW, Delphia, Siemens, and QWEST. Mr. Hriso currently is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media at East Tennessee State University.

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# **Encouraging Student Participation in Social Entrepreneurship Opportunities**

### **Abstract:**

Social entrepreneurs utilize the traits of commercial entrepreneurs; organizational abilities, opportunity identification, combining resources in novel ways, willingness to accept and manage risk and explosive growth or returns, to create enterprises that return high social value. As educators, we see opportunities where entrepreneurial skills can be applied to education, not-for-profit organizations, government offices and programs and philanthropic concerns and create service learning opportunities for students beyond the boundaries of the university. Many of us involved in higher education are frustrated with students who do not attend class, turn in assignments late or exhibit a lack of effort in classes where they pay tuition and receive a grade. It is a challenge, therefore, to gain the involvement of students in social entrepreneurship efforts where the reward (grade, pay or recognition) is not immediate or minimal and the trade-off (time management for their schedule) may be more fun or financially rewarding. This paper discusses the evolution for the process of enlisting student involvement in two distinct social entrepreneurship programs at our university.

The first program involves linking university skill sets in the arts, digital media, technology and project management to the planning, implementation and evaluation of a regional arts and music festival held in the city where our university operates. Students involved in this social entrepreneurial venture work with community volunteers, city government officials and local business owners for a period of nine to ten months. In the first two years of sponsoring this program the strategy has evolved from enlisting the help of a student technology club (Edge Club, Digital Media) to working with a small volunteer student team (3 to 4 students). In each case, the organization or student team that worked on the project received no academic credit for the work involved beyond enhancement of their resume. Initial enthusiasm was high but tended to decline as the time horizon for finishing the project extended beyond the current semester and other activities or demands competed for the students' participation.

The second program also utilizes a student organization (Students In Free Enterprise, SIFE) to work on social entrepreneurship projects. In SIFE we have found that the students prefer projects that entail an afternoon of preparation for a short presentation, or service within a 3-4 day period. In that this group is involved in a "competition" with SIFE teams from other institutions at the end of the year, it is important that they seek projects that will differentiate themselves. The short-term projects that they prefer do little to accomplish this differentiation. The projects that truly differentiate are those that require a high degree of preparation for an event that culminates at the end of the semester, or even the following year.

To that end, all students of this select team are required to create a long-term project that they will spearhead throughout the year. This leads to an escalation of commitment due to their "ownership" of that project. They are also required to assist another team member on their long-term project. Their efforts on these projects tend to be greater in that they realize that the other members will be assisting them on their project and they want to receive a conscientious effort from their teammates. This synergistic performance enhances both the number and quality of the projects. Using this method, we typically create 5 to 6 viable projects each year. Most teams that we compete with tend to have one major project per year. Using this system our university team has

completed an average of 10 projects per year for presentation, of which 2 to 3 have been major projects.

### **Introduction:**

Many university educators have struggled with how to incorporate service learning opportunities into a curriculum packed with required credits hours and student time constraints, yet most agree that the hands on experience gained through this exposure enhances and reinforces the students' academic preparation. This is further complicated when the service learning opportunity involves elements of social responsibility and entrepreneurship. Carolyn O'Grady in her text, "*Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education in Colleges and University*"<sup>1</sup> described the National Service Act of 1993 as a method:

- "Under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and the community;
- That is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides a structured time for a student to think, talk or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;
- That provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- That enhances what is taught in school by extending the students' learning beyond the curriculum and into the community and helps to foster the development of sense of caring for others."

Eyler and Giles<sup>2</sup> find that there is an empirical fit between our goals for students and the outcomes for service learning. They state that "if we want students who are lifelong learners, can use what they know and have the capacity for critical analysis, then programs like service-learning, which help them construct knowledge from experience and reflection, should form the core of their educational experience. Service-learning, and especially programs with good community placements, application of service to course work, extensive reflection, diversity and community voice, make a difference in student learning. There are other goals of higher education as well that may be affected by service-learning." Furthermore, Eyler and Giles<sup>2</sup> state that for service learning to be productive, faculty coaching and feedback need to be built into the assignment. They stated that "students were appreciative of instructors who could be flexible and recognize teachable moments to use student experience in advancing the agenda of the course" and that the instructors had to be knowledgeable of the process and the workload involved in order to be effective coaches. This paper discusses our efforts in developing service-learning opportunities for students in the College of Business and Technology and in finding ways to encourage students to become involved in these projects. We wanted projects where the students would have the opportunity to do important work in the community and have "real" responsibilities, where there was a close connection between the academic subject matter and what the students were doing in the community, where the service-learning projects were developed in partnership with the community and where the faculty mentors were involved in the project to the extent that coaching would be meaningful and on-target.

### **Service Learning Opportunities:**

The first service-learning opportunity that we want to discuss is the development of the Blue Plum Animation Festival. Our initial concept behind the establishment of the festival was three-fold. The city of Johnson City, located in Washington County, is home to our university. There is a need to provide employment opportunities for technically trained individuals upon graduation such that our intellectual capital in the region continues to grow. One area of expertise that is unique to the region is students trained in digital media. The Blue Plum Animation Festival was envisioned to highlight this geographic region as an area understanding the capabilities and create business expansion opportunities for digital media oriented businesses. Animators worldwide would submit their short (less than 5 minutes) family oriented animations, have them judged by world class animators and shown in a forum promoting digital media. Recent literature published indicates that regions attracting technology based entrepreneurs also have a strong arts entrepreneurship flavor associated with the community<sup>3</sup>. The establishment of a progressive arts community in turn might stimulate the attractiveness of our university's high-technology business incubator, as newly formed technology-based businesses look for attractive business climates where they can launch their business venture. Including the animation festival as a component of the already established Blue Plum Music and Arts festival provides another avenue for arts expansion in the downtown region of Johnson City. As the region becomes better known as a center for digital media and arts, it provides potential new business entrants needing digital media expertise the intellectual capital necessary to establish and grow their businesses.

Secondly, the city of Johnson City has developed a long-range economic development plan that has nine relevant subsections. One subsection is entitled "Downtown Revitalization" and a key component to the revitalization is through the growth of art based businesses downtown, art entrepreneurship and linking the university and region's arts communities. The Blue Plum Animation Festival intentionally links the university and region's arts communities through cross-disciplinary teams of students, faculty and festival volunteers working together on one common theme. Collaboration in other areas of the arts between the university and the community is one possible outcome of the project. The Blue Plum Animation Festival also provides the Blue Plum Music and Arts Festival organizers with student volunteers that have unique skill sets available for promotion, advertising, scheduling and the necessary manpower to run the festival. This annual festival attracts over 40,000 festival attendees stimulating the local economic environment and advertising the regions art entrepreneurship attitude.

Finally, the project creates a self-sustaining teaching module for under classman that provides experiential learning through participation in worker roles in various aspects of planning and running the event. It was anticipated that students involved in the project would come from varied academic backgrounds including students in engineering technology, marketing and management, digital media and performing and visual arts. We thought that as the festival gained in notoriety, students that had previously worked as volunteers for the project would graduate to management/leadership positions as they gained experience working on the festival over the course of their undergraduate program of study. In addition, students involved in the project would experience the need for

social entrepreneurship and would continue to be involved in their communities after leaving the shelter of higher education.

We did a lot of things right in the development of this project as highlighted by Carolyn O’Grady<sup>1</sup> and Eyster and Giles<sup>2</sup>. There was an expressed need from the community for the revitalization of the downtown district and arts entrepreneurship. We established a good linkage between the downtown arts communities and the digital media students at our university, reinforcing the utility of this discipline in the arts. The festival has grown over the two years of its existence and the students who were involved in the project felt that their participation was a valuable learning experience. Students were given responsibilities that were “real” and knew that their actions, either positive or negative, would have an impact on the festival. However, we have been continuously frustrated with the lack of student motivation for becoming involved in this experience. We started the student involvement through utilizing the Edge Digital Media Club. This club is for students that have an interest in digital media and gaming and has a relatively large membership (greater than 50 members). The president of the Edge Club took on the Animation Festival as a project that they wanted to participate in and initially had a large number of volunteers to work on the project. However, this project spanned two semesters and student volunteers lost interest due to time constraints, other interests, scheduling conflicts or a host of other reasons. As a result, the volunteer base dwindled to less than five students who were actively involved in the project and saw the project to completion.

The next year we decided to appeal to the student’s interest in self-promotion and discussed the advantages of having real-life opportunities to place on their resume to show the application of theory to practice. However, the Edge Club stated that they had no interest in providing a volunteer base for the festival even though the members that did participate saw value in working on the event. The two faculty mentors began to recruit students who they felt would stay on the project until completion and two of the five recruits who signed up had been volunteers the inaugural year of the animation festival. The student volunteers understood the value of having continuity in the volunteer base from year to year and recruited two undergraduate students to help with the showing of the animations at the festival itself. These students saw the final output without having to put in all of the upfront sweat equity and will be part of the student managers for this years festival (third year). In the first two years of the project participation was voluntary with no monetary or academic credit given to the participants. For the third year, we received a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), supporting the growth of digital media in northeast Tennessee and are able to offer two academic credits for participation in the management of the Blue Plum Animation Festival, a small cash stipend and the all important real-life experience. In addition, we have also given a portion of the mentoring responsibilities to a graduate student who will oversee the day to day management of planning, organizing, advertising and implementing the festival. The two faculty mentors will still retain their mentoring responsibilities but at a level above the day to day details of festival management. We will discuss mentoring in another section of this paper.



The second service learning program also utilizes a student organization (Students In Free Enterprise, SIFE) to work on social entrepreneurship projects. In SIFE, students prefer projects that entail an afternoon of preparation for a short presentation, or service within a 3-4 day period. In that this group is involved in a “competition” with SIFE teams from other institutions at the end of the year, it is important that they seek projects that will differentiate themselves. The short-term projects that they prefer do little to accomplish this differentiation. The projects that truly differentiate are those that require a high degree of preparation for an event that culminates at the end of the semester, or even the following year.

To that end, all students of this select team are required to create a long-term project that they will spearhead throughout the year. This leads to an escalation of commitment due to their “ownership” of that project. They are also required to assist another team member on their long-term project. Their efforts on these projects tend to be greater in that they realize that the other members will be assisting them on their project and they want to receive a conscientious effort from their teammates. This synergistic performance enhances both the number and quality of the projects. Using this method, we typically create 5 to 6 viable projects each year. Most teams that we compete with tend to have one major project per year. Using this system our university team has completed an average of 10 projects per year for presentation, of which 2 to 3 have been major projects.

Another important element of these long term projects is the focus on the social elements of entrepreneurial organizations. This burgeoning field of study has evaded researchers’ ability to ascertain the relationship between fiscal success and socially oriented criteria. Through the involvement of our students, in and of itself a socially responsible behavior, we implore our targeted audience to consider their fiscal support of socially oriented entities of their choosing. Some of our past clients have been non-profit firms where we seek to assist them in carrying out their mission in an efficient manner. Current research included assessing the social behavior of entrepreneurial firms versus publicly owned entities. Propositions include such things as entrepreneurs’ tendency to target their social behavior to their idiosyncratic interests while publicly owned firms will tend to give to social entities that act as a clearinghouse for many social entities.

The service learning in SIFE is designed to incorporate the students’ educational training with a passion for their community and complementing these with proper faculty oversight and resources. One excellent example of this is the Monster’s Inc. project that is designed to provide a forum for discussion of corporate ethics at various levels of primary and secondary education. This particular project exemplifies the characteristics of a sound service learning environment as recommended by Giles & Eyles<sup>3</sup>.

The initial stage of the project requires the students (team of three) to meet with the host teacher (K-12<sup>th</sup> grade) and delineate the objectives of the project. They are given a questionnaire for their students regarding the students’ perceptions of what ethics are and how they assess them. At the initial meeting they also briefly discuss the nature of the movie (in all cases the teacher has seen the movie in the recent past) and what our ultimate learning objectives are for the project. The students are shown the movie during

an extended class period and are then asked to assess four of the characters on their behavior. These questions range from the legality of their behavior to their motives. The SIFE members then follow-up in the classroom. Results have shown that the students begin to understand the difference between legality and ethical behavior based upon motive and results. These lessons will translate to the students' consideration of their own and others' motives with relationship to ethical decision making in the future.

The members of the student group also gain valuable experience via this project. They learn to represent themselves and their organization to the outside community. They are exposed to the problems and dilemmas of the classroom and the opportunities and excitement as well. Their interaction with the students teaches them the responsibility of being in positions of authority and using that authority to provide a learning environment to others. They are able to use the materials taught them in class to enhance their teaching of these students.

The exposure of our SIFE team to the public and private school systems in our area provides multiple benefits as well. In that the program is affiliated with East Tennessee State University (ETSU), it provides a positive influence and connection with the community at large for an entity that tends to be viewed as an internally focused institution by most. To see ETSU involvement in these projects gives the community an understanding that we are truly connected to the community. In addition, the secondary students are exposed to students from ETSU in a positive way which should improve their perception of the school and their likelihood of seriously considering the University for their post-secondary education. This is one example of the projects that the SIFE team accomplishes over the year, but these considerations serve as a pre-screening mechanism perspective projects.

Participation in the SIFE group is through invitation and cajoling by the faculty advisor, although everyone is welcome. Through hand selecting participants for this club effort, the faculty advisor builds a team that has the ability, willingness and drive to complete the project through coordinated teamwork. This is similar to the recruitment method used in the second-year of the Blue Plum Animation Festival, however the difference between these projects is that the SIFE projects are one-off in nature and the animation festival is an annual event where previous experience is critical in maintaining and improving the quality of the festival offering. Students in the SIFE group receive no monetary compensation or academic credit for their participation in the team process.

**Mentoring:**

Eyler and Giles<sup>2</sup> state that for service learning to be productive, faculty coaching and feedback need to be built into the assignment. We could not agree more with their assessment. For the Blue Plum Animation Team the faculty mentors split their responsibilities to within and external to the university. The mentor responsible for the external interface meets with the community artists and festival planners to provide a "university interface" to the community and to ensure that the students do not commit to more than the university can offer. This requires numerous after-hours meetings with the festival committee and this year these meetings will also be attended by the graduate

student manager. Undergraduates are included in the meetings as the need for their expertise and responsibility for the festival is discussed, giving them an interface to the community and an opportunity to speak in public to an adult audience external to the university. The internal mentor spends time primarily with the undergraduate student team making sure that they meet deadlines and serves as a resource to facilitate the management of the festival. Throughout the project, the internal mentor randomly sits in on the external mentor's meetings and vice versa to ensure that all bases are being covered. At the conclusion of the festival a wrap-up meeting is scheduled and all participants are involved in a debriefing and discussion of how well the festival operation was managed and changes that we need to make for the next year. Because student participants are receiving credit for assisting in the management of this year's festival, year end reports will be required by each student as dictated by the course requirements. The SIFE groups tend to self-manage their teams with the faculty mentor having both formal and informal meetings with the student teams. In this case, the faculty mentor serves much like the internal mentor for the animation festival helping to direct the team and facilitating the process to conclusion.

### **Conclusions:**

Service learning opportunities are excellent teaching tools for students to apply their theoretical learning to real-world application. Instructors need to find innovative ways to recruit students to participate in these offerings. We have found that once a student is involved in a project such as those described above, they have the desire to do an excellent job and believe that the experience is well worth the time required to fulfill the objective. Offering course credit and small monetary compensation appears to help in the recruitment of student managers, however this is the first year that we have tried this approach and we will need to assess the effectiveness of this technique. Remember to make sure that the service-learning projects allow the students to do important work that is critical to the success of the project, that there is a close connection between previous course work and the project, that mentoring and coaching times should be built into the project and attendance at these meetings is required, that the projects are developed in concert with the community and meet needs in the community, that the faculty mentors know the time requirements of the project and that they are involved in the project in more than name alone and that most of all the learning environment is fun and rewarding.

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