Chapter 9

Opportunities for Service-Learning Partnerships in the Information Systems Curriculum

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Service-learning partnerships involve students taking part in community service that relates to their academic course experience. Students who major in information systems are increasingly being provided with real-world experiences. These real-world experiences offer numerous benefits. Students can immediately apply their course knowledge to real-world situations. Students can get the experience of grappling with political, social, and ethical issues in a workplace setting. In addition, students can develop a sense of civic responsibility by contributing their skills to their communities. This chapter presents the issues involved in implementing the service-learning paradigm in an information systems curriculum. Examples of successful service-learning courses are presented, and new possibilities for service-learning courses are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Courses in the information systems curriculum are increasingly incorporating hands-on experiences for students. Student evaluation is no longer limited to exams and research papers. Projects are becoming an increasingly common part of
the Information Systems curriculum. It is one thing to describe to students how an
information system is developed, modified, or maintained. It is a totally different
experience for students to experience first-hand an information system being de-
veloped, modified, or maintained. If the students can work with real users in a
real-world experience to develop an information system, this is a valuable experi-
ence. The question is how to place students in an appropriate real-world setting.
An educational paradigm called service-learning would seem to be appropriate
for forming a partnership. In service-learning, students take part in community
service experiences relating to their coursework (Jacoby, 1996). This paper will
discuss opportunities for implementing the service-learning paradigm in the infor-
mation systems curriculum.

SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning is an educational paradigm in which students take part in
community service (Jacoby, 1996). This community service is structured to relate
to course material, with the goal of strengthening the course experience. The idea
is that the service-learning projects offer an opportunity to immediately apply the
material learned in the classroom. Instead of simply discussing the concepts in a
classroom setting, students get a chance to use their knowledge to assist others
(Jacoby, 1996). While gaining experience working in their community, students
also strengthen their sense of civic responsibility. Service-learning can provide a
strong educational experience for the students involved.

Community-based non-profit organizations are in need of assistance with
technology. Non-profit organizations tend to have smaller budgets for technology,
and therefore cannot afford to hire many people to work on their technology
needs. For instance, schools frequently cannot afford to provide Internet training
for their teachers (Lazar and Norcio, 2001). In some cases, schools might be
required to spend their technology budgets on capital expenses such as hardware
and software, instead of developing new resources or managing existing resources
or providing training (General Accounting Office, 1998). Other non-profit organi-
zations, such as parent groups, and support groups, usually are dependent on
donations of money and time to effectively utilize technology. Groups of technol-
ogy workers may come in on a Saturday to wire a school for the Internet. Profes-
sional user groups may take donations of old computer equipment, refurbish and
upgrade the computers, and then donate the now-functional computers to non-
profit organizations in the local community. Many community groups are depen-
dent on the goodwill of their local citizens to effectively use technology.

Service-learning is a useful technique for incorporating real-world experi-
ences into the curriculum. Local community groups are in need of assistance with
technology. Students are in need of real-world experiences that relate to their
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