Chapter 10
Critical Success Factors for Partnering with Nonprofit Organizations on Digital Technology Service-Learning Projects: A Case Study

James P. Lawler
Pace University, USA

ABSTRACT
This case study analyzes critical success factors for digital technology projects in service-learning courses at Pace University, a leading school of computer science and information systems in New York City. The study argues that the factors of collaboration, pedagogy, project management, strategy, and technology are foundational not only to implementing and generating meaningful benefits from projects, but also to ensuring durable and fruitful partnerships with nonprofit organizations. The findings from this case study will help instructors considering expansion of high-tech service-learning courses to secure innovative partnerships by encouraging all parties involved to maintain focus on service and human interactions rather than simply on technology.

INTRODUCTION
Civic engagement is defined in this chapter as empowering or a difference in the civic life of [a community] and developing the combination of knowledge … and motivation to [enable] that difference … [and as] promoting the quality of life in a community, through both non-political and political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000), a definition articulated by Project Pericles (www.projectpericles.org), an organization that promotes civic engagement among institutions of higher
education (Liazos & Liss, 2009). Service-learning is a form of experiential learning in which academic courses are enhanced through community service (Hunter & Brisbin, 2000). In many cases, service-learning engages students in experiencing life at nonprofit organizations that help disabled or disadvantaged citizens of a community. The learning can be focused on challenging students to initiate technology-based solutions to the needs or problems of the nonprofit organizations and to reflect on their learning throughout the project process (Petkus, 2000). Student learning is improved through introspective perceptual and cognitive reflection on service experiences (Dunlap, 2006).

The focus of this chapter is maximizing the benefits of service-learning projects for nonprofit organizations. In the current economy, nonprofit organizations are confronted by budget constraints that simultaneously increase their need for and decrease their ability to support service-learning projects. To sustain their operations, these organizations need help beyond projects that “do good.” They need meaningful help for sustaining their missions. This can be a problem when it comes to service-learning projects, in part because of logistical issues. Projects at nonprofit organizations rarely fit readily into the academic calendar. Short-term projects may be difficult for nonprofit organizations to manage in a semester (Tryon, Stoecker, Martin, Seblonka, Hilgendorf & Nellis, 2008), but long-term service-learning projects, especially those involving digital technology, can be difficult for faculty and students to manage due to the realities of course duration. In addition, it may be challenging for nonprofit organizations and faculty members to maintain projects across subsequent semesters, after students move on to other courses (Daynes & Longo, 2004). Short-term, semester-long service-learning projects may not even generate meaningful benefits for institutions of higher education or nonprofit organizations if students are not instructed about and significantly engaged with the missions of the nonprofit organizations (Mitchell, 2008).

The burden of effectively enabling benefits from service-learning is a challenge for institutions of higher education and for nonprofit organizations (Creighton, 2007) that if not met can negate the concept of service (Pompa, 2002).

This chapter introduces the critical success factors of collaboration, pedagogy, project management, strategy and technology, that my experience shows can help faculty and partners to secure meaningful benefits from service-learning projects and ensure fruitful partnerships between higher education institutions and nonprofit organizations. The factors are analyzed in my courses that included technology-based service-learning projects for nonprofit organizations in partnership with the Seidenberg School of Computer Science and Information Systems at Pace University (SSCSIS), a leading member of Project Pericles. Relationships between three specific nonprofit organizations and SSCSIS are analyzed in this chapter, inasmuch as these relationships are considered to be foundational to service-learning projects (Benson & Harkavy, 2000) and the technology projects initiated by them. The partnerships are grounded in personal relationships between higher education instructors and nonprofit staff members (Mihalyñuk & Seifer, 2004). These partnerships are also analyzed on a spectrum of relationships that are considered in the literature to range from transactional to transformational (Enos & Morton, 2003). This chapter introduces practices that will help instructors to successfully use service-learning as a tool for teaching technology-focused courses.

BACKGROUND

The Seidenberg School is a leading pioneer in service-learning with technology, and our courses are making a difference in nonprofit organizations in downtown New York City (Coppola, Daniels, Gannon, Hale, Hayes, Kline, Mosley, Novak & Pennachio, 2008). Projects generated through