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Service-Learning programs for Romanian students – an analysis of the international programs and ideas of implementation

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Abstract

One of the most common definitions of Service-Learning (S-L) programs refers to the use of community-based projects to supplement traditional curricula of the students and to enrich "by doing" the subjects covered in the teaching environment. The aim of this paper is to present a review of the international S-L programs in higher education system (European and international Universities) and to analyze those ideas that could be implemented in Romania. While in most of the SL international programs, the agents involved in the delivery of the SL programs are the teachers, we will especially discuss those SL programs in which the agents are not the teachers, but specific categories of students. Specifically, we performed a case study of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education ("Babes-Bolyai" University, Romania), which, since 1992, has one of the most active Student Associations in Romania, i.e. Romanian Association of Psychology Students (RAPS). Also, the Faculty has several successful distance learning programs in Psychology, Special Education and Pedagogy. Thus, the Faculty has these two student-based categories of driving forces in terms of offering themselves SL activities: (1) a very active Association of students and (2) a large number of mature students from the distance learning study programs – most of these students are currently employed and/or have graduated another Faculty (some of them are also holders of PhD titles). Based on the literature review, we discuss here the possibilities to include these two categories of students in the Quality Assurance program of the Faculty, in terms of establishing their role as active agents of the QA process. These strategies should be based on the facts that: (1) the members of the Student Association have the potential to develop themselves as a culture with standards and values in the area QA at Faculty level, and (2) the category of mature (adult) students could bring, in a structured manner, an important insight to the other types of students at levels of career orientation, work-related expectations and humane-abilities development. Most important, the ideas of S-L programs implementation are analyzed from the perspective of internalization strategies of the European standards for internal quality assurance within Romanian higher education system.

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1. Introduction – Working definitions of Service-Learning in higher education systems

In the context of higher education at international level, one of the most common definitions of Service-Learning (S-L) refers to it as an educational tool that "…seeks to engage individuals in activities that combine both community service and academic learning. Because Service-Learning programs are typically rooted in formal courses (core academic, elective, or vocational), the service activities are usually based on particular curricular concepts that are being taught" (Furco, 2002).

When defining Service-Learning in higher education, it is often suggested that a distinction has to be made between community service and Service-Learning, as well as between volunteerism and S-L (Fiske, 2001; Furco and Holland, 2005). Thus, S-L distinguishes itself from community service and volunteerism by its connection with the learning environment (curriculum connection), i.e., S-L is a teaching and learning approach that can integrate community services and volunteerism with academic study, aiming to enrich the learning process (by a better understanding of course content and a broader appreciation of the discipline), to promote civic responsibility and to strengthen communities (Fiske, 2001; Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Hanover Research, 2011).

This type of curricula-related Service-Learning activities is very common among American educational institutions (public schools, colleges and universities). Most of these institutions have a clear managerial structure of the Service-Learning programs, such as offices and regulations for crediting the S-L. Thus, almost one thousand post-secondary institutions are currently members of Campus Compact, which is a national coalition of institutions committed to civic purpose of higher education, i.e. offering the students the possibility to develop their civic responsibility in connection to the academic environment (Butin, 2005). Civic responsibility is defined as the active participation of an individual in the public life of a community (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2003).

Civic responsibility can be enhanced and developed through Service-Learning at following levels (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2003): (1) direct service – students have face-to-face contact with the service recipients (e.g. tutoring other students and/or recipients, serving meals at a homeless shelter, working with the elderly in a nursing home, helping visually impaired students to explore and familiarize themselves with the learning settings etc.); (2) indirect service – students are involved in a service without having to directly face the recipient (e.g. promoting the adoptions of animals, supporting environmental projects etc.); (3) advocacy – students inform and educate others (including other students) about specific aspects and/or a particular issue, aiming to eliminate the cause of a particular problem (e.g. producing informative posters and flyers about sexually transmitted diseases, about the prevention of domestic violence, writing letters to legislators etc.).

Several examples of the most common S-L activities involving students of the American universities are listed bellow (University of Maryland, www.umaryland.edu/islsi):

(1) Aging-related S-L activities – these S-L projects are aimed at assisting senior citizens, most often following the paradigm of Successful Aging (i.e. assuring the optimal interaction of the senior citizens with their environment). These projects usually involve visiting nursing homes, while students are informed about the aging process and about the special need of elderly people;

(2) Animals-related S-L activities – these projects are usually aimed at preventing animal cruelty and promoting animal safety, and they include visits to local animal shelters to assist and promote safe practices for animals;

(3) Civic engagement S-L activities – these projects are aimed at increasing public awareness, such as the motivation of students to express their vote or the level of preparation of students to become better decision-makers for their society;

(4) Disability awareness/support S-L activities – these projects aim at increasing the awareness level of students toward different forms of disabilities and toward the importance of care giving and support that can be offered by them to persons with special needs, especially to their peers (i.e. students with disabilities) within educational setting. Also, visits and care giving events involving students (including charity events) are commonly organized by institutions and NGOs dealing with persons with special needs;

(5) Education-related S-L activities - these projects include student tutoring or mentoring services. Also, they may involve continuing education or they may fundraise to provide scholarships for different categories of students;

(6) Environment-related S-L activities - these projects aim at promoting environmentally friendly practices and attitudes in community (e.g. participation of students at restoration projects of indigenous species, activities of promoting the local museums, activities of cleaning up the green squares and local landmarks etc.).