Introduction

A focus on PRME Principle 3 led the Milgard School of Business at the University of Washington to a curriculum innovation that has proven effective in impacting our students’ understanding of responsible leadership and the role of governance in leading organisations to be more effective, more sustainable and better citizens. The course, Board Governance, is taught through a service learning internship with local non-profit boards combined with a traditional classroom curriculum that introduces the principles and theory of good governance. This course is a senior level undergraduate course at the Milgard School of Business. We do have a few graduate students who take the course each year. We currently co-teach the course and spend a fair amount of time recruiting agencies to serve as host boards for our students. We are able to accomplish this due to our Center for Leadership & Social Responsibility which provides support.

Challenges

The genesis for our course on Board Governance was in the different perspectives that two faculty members brought to conversations about how to better connect students to community in ways that create value for both sides. One faculty member has a background in the non-profit sector, bringing awareness of the demographic limitations of many non-profit boards: members tend to be older, wealthier, and less culturally diverse than the communities being served. The other faculty member’s experience in the academic world indicated that students were often not aware of board service, though it is a common role for business and community leaders, and were unlikely to gain a rich understanding of governance without a guided academic experience.

Actions taken

From these perspectives, we developed the idea of an extended undergraduate learning experience that would link students to non-profit boards and leverage both experiential and classroom learning. The students would gain knowledge of governance as well as an understanding of many elements required to manage an organisation: strategic planning, financial oversight, leadership, teamwork, assessment, and guiding change. Students would also develop a valuable set of skills in making sense of new situations, participating in meetings, communicating effectively, making group decisions, and recognising ethical dilemmas. Finally, students would leverage their academic skills to provide their host organisations with research and reflective analysis that could be used to enhance board functioning and governance.

Our extensive search for a course model found examples of student internships at non-profits, courses on governance, and graduate-level board internships, but nothing like the course we had in mind. We decided to build our own course that was tailored to our community, but designed so that it could be replicated by others.
Recognising that we would need support in finding non-profit boards where we could place students, we developed a partnership with a local agency that served as a resource hub for non-profit education, support, and capacity building. At the same time, we worked with an undergraduate student on a research project to identify the academic literature that would underpin a course in non-profit board governance.

We launched the Non-profit Governance course sequence in 2009. The course is now titled Board Governance to emphasise the applicability of governance principles to many contexts. Students begin in Winter quarter with a 2-credit class (The University of Washington system is a quarter system where a 5-credit hour class is equal to one full class and a full-load is 15 credits) that is designed to introduce them to basic governance principles and immerse them in board service. Students attend board meetings, collect information on the organisation and its governance and present their organisation to their classmates. In Spring quarter, with some organisational knowledge and experience, students take a 5-credit course that extensively explores governance theory and practices, using examples from non-profit, corporate and government settings. Students continue their board service and engagement with their non-profit until the course concludes in June. They conduct research on a governance topic relevant to their board and produce a written report that is presented to both the professor and the organisation. Although it’s not a requirement of the course, a majority of students are invited to make a formal presentation to their boards and provide insights and advice.

Results

Students not only gain the course knowledge and skills described above, but share their experiences with classmates. They gain greater awareness of the needs of the broader community and the challenges of serving those needs. Students build relationships with board members who serve as role models of citizenship and community service, and gain access to new networks of community members. They also learn a great deal about the ‘hidden’ aspects of organisational life that are so important to accomplishing goals, such as values, interpersonal and group politics, and building relationships. Finally, students learn extensively from each other and from the variety of approaches to governance taken by different organisations in the community. We believe this is an excellent model for lifelong learning, where insights are gained from many places and ‘right’ answers may not exist.

Non-profit boards gain another perspective from student apprentices, who are often different from the board members on several dimensions of diversity, ranging from age and ethnicity to values and orientation toward technology. The presence of the student in their meetings encourages them to examine their practices and challenge some of their taken-for-granted assumptions. Some boards gain in a very practical way from the students’ work by improving their recordkeeping, board member orientation, and communication practices. All the organisations benefit from the opportunity to reflect on governance and to consider students’ suggestions for how to better achieve goals. Finally, the boards have access to students as future volunteers, advocates, or permanent board members.

The community as a whole gains from a growing pool of our graduates who both understand the value of service to the non-profit community and have knowledge and skills that are beneficial to boards and organisations. While many boards have sought to increase the diversity of their membership, they are not always well-connected to other segments of the community. Our diverse student population
provides an excellent point of access into many sectors of the community, and the students are often willing and able ambassadors.

**More Information**

If you are interested in replicating this model, we have ideas about how you could partner with your community to create the capacity for these board partnerships. For more detailed information on this course series and how it is run, visit the course website at: [http://www.tacoma.uw.edu/clsr/board-governance](http://www.tacoma.uw.edu/clsr/board-governance)

**The role of PRME/sustainability principles**

- **P1 – Purpose** – this course develops the capabilities of future generators of sustainable value by engaging them in the theory and practice of good organisational governance
- **P3 – Method** – this course is unique in its delivery and service-learning model
- **P5 – Partnership** – we partner with leaders of non-profit organisations, a significant sector in the US and leaders of environmental and social change