

Responding to Disaster with a Service Learning Project for Honors Students

STEPHEN A. YODER

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, April 27, 2011, one of the worst natural disasters in the history of Alabama struck in the form of ferocious tornadoes touching down in various parts of the state. The dollar amount of the property damage was in the billions. Lives were lost and thousands of survivors' lives were seriously and in many cases forever disrupted.

A few days later, the dean of my school, a school of business that is part of a larger university, dropped by my office unannounced to tell me that the university's president had just called to tell him that unnamed donors had agreed to give money to the university so that the school of business could help the survivors. He said "we" had a meeting on the matter later that day with a senior university officer.

The following is a summary of the program that developed as we strove to provide help to the survivors, along with some lessons learned that might be helpful to others considering a service learning experience for honors students. I believe that our program demonstrated that a somewhat impromptu response to a disaster can be an effective service learning experience in an honors program.

The disaster that befell our community was extraordinary in its impact, with a disproportionate effect on low-to-moderate-income families and neighborhoods. The generosity of our donors was also unique as was their desire for students to have a finance-focused experience. However, the lessons learned from how we responded to our misfortune should apply to disasters of all sizes and types and to responses that neither involve distribution of donated funds nor are undertaken by a school of business.

DIRECTION FROM THE DONORS

I did not know who our donors were or the amount of their donation when the dean and I attended our first meeting with the university officer who had spoken with the donors a few days after the disaster had occurred. We learned

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

at the meeting that our donors were a group of local business leaders led by one individual with very strong ties to our university in both financial support and service on governing bodies for the university and its affiliates. Our university is a large public research institution that is part of a system of other research universities.

As it turns out, the donors had only two directives to give us at the start: (1) that their funds should be used to help the survivors of the disaster and (2) that their funds should be used in a way that involved business students in some way. Either the donors or the senior university officials communicating with them provided early direction that the funds be used to make small loans to the disaster survivors, perhaps because this focus would provide the desired business content. Alternatively, the donors might have first decided that they would like to fund a loan program and then directed the funds to the business school because lending money is a “business.”

Lesson Learned: *Although it was our donors who took the initiative, your school’s development personnel might know of donors who could be contacted in the aftermath of (or perhaps even before) a disaster to fund a student-centered service learning project. Your school might have internal funding for such a project as well.*

I should also provide some background on myself because my experiences shaped the eventual design of the project. Just a few years before this event, I had joined the faculty of the school after a thirty-year career in business, mostly as a banking lawyer. I directed the school’s honors program, which is a selective program for juniors and seniors focused on leadership. Most but not all of the students in the program are business majors. In our first meeting, the dean told me that he thought that these honors students would make excellent participants in the sort of service learning program that seemed to be evolving; in retrospect, this would have been an interesting hypothesis to research.

DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM

As I left the first meeting with the university’s liaison with our donors, I recall not knowing quite where to start. I was immediately concerned because the semester was coming to a close, and students would likely be more focused on final exams and summer activities than on service learning projects. I also knew, though, that the needs of the survivors were great because, coincidentally, I had volunteered to staff a “311” hot line at our local United Way a few days after the disaster, and I had heard first-hand the desperate pleas for help from those who had been affected by the tornadoes. In addition, I knew that senior university officials were understandably interested in showing quick progress to our donors.

One of the courses I teach is strategic leadership. I decided to practice what I preached and draw up a strategic plan for the program to help me compose

my thoughts. I wish I could have incorporated this process into a real-time class so that students could work on the plan with me, but there simply was not time.

It is fundamental in strategic planning that every organization should have a mission, vision, and values statement. Below is the statement that I came up with for the upstart program, not in the first draft but within about a week or two after I had become more familiar with how our community was responding to the tornadoes and so could work out a great many details. I later used the statement to describe the program as we brought in students to participate. Even for non-business teachers, I recommend formulating a vision, mission, and values statement for a new service learning project.

Program Vision

To be a source of financial support for Alabamians affected by the tornadoes of April 27, 2011 and to be a servant leadership learning opportunity for students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Program Mission

To make loans in amounts of up to \$1,000 each to persons affected by the tornadoes of April 27, 2011, interest-free and due in one year, but forgivable in whole or in part at maturity upon demonstration of ongoing need.

Program Values

- *Respect for the dignity of the tornado victims*
- *Empathy for the financial hardships of the tornado victims*
- *Recognition of the importance of providing students with learning opportunities in servant leadership and social entrepreneurship*
- *Cooperation with other organizations having complementary missions*

The ideas in the statement reflect much of what I learned about designing a service learning project for honors and other students, which I share here for other college teachers and administrators. In addition, many of the lessons I learned about service learning were also valuable lessons for designing the strategy of a human services organization, which I can use in my teaching of strategic leadership. Indeed, I try to get strategy students to compare the strategic planning process for a traditional business with that for a community or other tax-exempt organization because many business students will find themselves in community roles either directly as employees or indirectly as volunteers.

Lesson Learned: *The process of preparing a quick strategic plan for a new service learning process can help everyone focus on what is important and achievable.*

COLLABORATION WITH OTHERS

At the beginning of this project, my dean and other senior university officers might have envisioned my setting up a table in the school's lobby staffed by volunteer students who would hand out cash to survivors of the disaster in return for IOUs. Perhaps they thought that we might place an advertisement in the local newspaper or distribute flyers in the affected areas in order to find the people in need.

My own inclination was not to be a lone ranger, and this inclination eventually became one of the program's core values. I had experience as a volunteer with local human services agencies, including our local United Way and our local community foundation. I knew that these organizations had begun to respond immediately after the tornadoes had struck, and, as noted above, I had volunteered on a help line.

I also learned early on that our university's own internal "fund" that provides financial assistance to employees of the university was addressing the needs of the university's own employees who had been affected by the tornadoes. That fund's administrator turned out to be one of my most valued colleagues in the administration of the service learning program. She was enthusiastic, well-connected in the human services field, and, having a social work background, knowledgeable about how to deal with people who have survived traumatic events.

Lesson Learned: *For human services-related projects, collaboration with your college or university's own employee assistance fund can prove fruitful.*

I learned from the employee fund administrator that representatives of the human services agencies in our community were starting to meet periodically as a large group to determine how best to meet the emerging longer-term needs of the disaster survivors. The fund's administrator and I attended, along with an honors student volunteer, an early meeting of representatives of more than fifty separate human services agencies. Watching these organizations struggle through the process of cooperation was a reminder of how collaboration can be inefficient at times. However, in the long run, none of the organizations acting alone could have cumulatively accomplished nearly what was eventually accomplished by the assembled group.

In addition to the collaboration among human services agencies and my own collaboration with the university employee fund's administrator in working with those agencies, I also began collaborating with a professional in the university's finance department, who turned out to be an invaluable ally in carrying out the mission of our new program. At our university, the finance department administers a separate tax-exempt foundation that supports the mission of our university. Donors generally are able to contribute either to the university or to the foundation, and some have preferences for giving to the foundation rather than directly to the state-affiliated university. My project colleague in the

finance department was adept at building Excel spreadsheets, a skill which it turned out we would need in a number of ways.

Lesson Learned: *If your university has a foundation the mission of which might include support of student service learning, establish a relationship with the leadership of that foundation.*

We realized early on that we would need at least two more collaborators as we designed the new program: a bank and a law firm. We struck a deal for students to meet with tornado survivors at a particular branch of one bank, close to campus, where the branch's management agreed to speedily cash or deposit the loan or grant checks even if our program's clients did not have accounts at the bank. We thought it was important for survivors not to face any unnecessary bureaucracy given that many were already facing considerable hurdles in obtaining other relief and given that many did not have established banking relationships.

Lesson Learned: *Banks are anxious to show their responsiveness to community needs, particularly where there is a financial element, so use your own or your school's contacts with local banks where appropriate in designing service learning projects where financial services might be involved.*

As for a law firm relationship, I knew enough about financial services law to know that, if we were lending money (the foundation would be the lender), we would have to follow "the rules." Fortunately, an expert in consumer lending law at a local law firm was willing and able on a pro bono basis to prepare a document that we eventually called a "repayment agreement." The concept of characterizing our loan document as a "repayment agreement" grew out of the realization over the first few weeks that our likely clients were not particularly creditworthy. Therefore, we asked for and received permission from our donors to have some flexibility to make grants instead of loans with a portion of the donated funds and, more importantly, to make loans that would be non-interest-bearing and forgivable in the appropriate circumstances. Hence, with the guidance of our attorney, we called our agreement with clients who we determined might be able to repay us (see below for discussion of this determination process) a "repayment agreement" rather than a "loan agreement."

After doing some post-project research into service learning pedagogy, I have learned that our project's emphasis on collaboration as a strategic value might also have enhanced our program as a service learning experience. Porter et al. describe two paradigms for service learning: the charity model and the social justice model. In a human services context, the charity model assumes that government or tax-exempt agencies will engage students as volunteers to assist in carrying out their human services missions. In this straightforward model, students gain a personal sense of efficacy and an appreciation for connecting with their communities. Students in our program who worked directly with borrowers and grantees would have this opportunity.

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

Critics of the charity model say that students who merely work on the mission of an organization do not learn the “rules of engagement that structure citizen participation” (Porter et al. 67, citing Crenson and Ginsberg). Such critics advocate the social justice model, which calls for students to learn about structural problems in the social sector in which they are working and perhaps even engage in efforts to solve the problems (Porter et al. 67). The students who accompanied us to the early meetings of the long-term recovery committee, with over fifty representatives of human services agencies gathered in a room trying to figure out what to do next, learned first-hand about the inherent inefficiencies in our safety net for disaster survivors.

Students also saw the value of intra-organization collaboration in the interaction among my university colleagues’ social service and financial management orientations and in my own orientation toward the students’ educations in business. For their careers at a business organization, for example, business students need to learn to collaborate with other departments in order to achieve their individual goals within the organization.

RESPECT AND EMPATHY FOR THE SURVIVORS

Within hours after the tornadoes struck, our employee fund administrator had already been in touch with employees of our university who had been affected by the disaster. She had already provided some financial grants to these employees from the university’s employee assistance fund. Based on these experiences, as well as her other social work experience, she told me that, as we began to recruit students to participate in the program, we should provide them the kind of training that social work students receive on dealing with people in need. For example, she told me that it was natural for volunteers to empathize by saying things like “I know just how you feel” or “Thank goodness no one was hurt” or “I’m sure everything will turn out okay.” She said that survivors of disasters do not respond positively to such attempts at consolation, believing instead that no one can truly understand just how awful life has been for them. We encapsulated these concepts in two of the values for the program: “respect for the dignity” and “empathy for the financial hardships” of the survivors, and we discussed them in our student training described below.

Lesson Learned: *If your school has any social work courses, consider partnering with faculty and students in those courses in your response to a disaster.*

We also had each student who signed up to participate sign and return to the employee assistance fund administrator an agreement to maintain the confidentiality of all personal information learned about applicants to the program. The SharePoint site described below was only accessible by students who had signed this agreement. This process itself was a valuable lesson in both human respect and dignity as well as privacy laws and regulations.

Lesson Learned: *Remember to maintain the confidentiality of personal information.*

RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS

I believe that the primary reason I was designated to lead our school's involvement in the assistance program for the tornado survivors was that I directed the school's honors program, whose students would, in the mind of at least the dean, be ideal candidates for this type of service learning experience. Whether honors students were indeed ideal for this program would have been an interesting research project based on the actual experience we had in recruiting students for the program, but we had no time to design or implement the necessary research protocols for such research, which would have included obtaining approval of our university's Institutional Review Board.

Today, after the project has been completed, I know that research on medical students has shown a positive correlation between class rank based on grade point average and a measure of service learning involvement known as Commitment and Involvement to Service Learning (CISL). As described in Brush et al. (10), Tulane University School of Medicine has a service learning requirement in a "Foundations of Medicine" course. Students with higher numbers of hours spent in the program have scored higher in the CISL assessment. Interestingly, high participators in the service learning program were overrepresented in the middle quartiles of GPA-based class rank, "perhaps indicating a choice made by students to make service and leadership a high priority during their medical school careers."

The findings as to class rank in a medical school service learning program pose an interesting question for an undergraduate honors program. On the one hand, as described below, the pool of honors students from which we recruited for our program had many high achievers. Therefore, we might expect that, if we compared our honors students to other students at the university, our honors students' GPA-based class ranks would be in the top quartile of the university, indicating that honors students taken as a group would not be the most likely to embrace service learning and that my dean's assumption was mistaken. On the other hand, like a school of medicine, an honors program is likely to be composed of already successful students, so perhaps the implication of the findings of Brush et al. for an honors program is that, within a group of already high-achieving students, the middle quartiles are more likely to be interested in a service learning opportunity. These issues might form the basis of some interesting research.

In my school of business, twenty-five students per year are selected in the fall semester of their junior years to be part of our honors program. Selection is based on grades earned through their sophomore year and on faculty recommendations. The fifty students (juniors and seniors) compose less than 3% of the total undergraduate school of business student population of approximately 1,800. The focus of the honors program is business leadership and includes

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

three required courses: (1) in the spring semester of their junior year students take a “principles of leadership” course, (2) in the fall semester of their senior year students take a strategic leadership course (see discussion above), and (3) in the spring semester of their senior year students do an independent project on leadership. The honors program has no public service or service learning requirement.

Our school’s honors program is part of a larger honors college, a confederation of honors programs in other parts of the university as well as students in four university-wide honors programs in which students participate for some or all of their college experience: (1) a program focused on experiential learning, (2) a program focused on community leadership, (3) a program focused on scientific research, and (4) a program with a broadly interdisciplinary course of study that replaces the core curriculum.

I quickly concluded that, although our nascent survivor assistance program was housed within the business school, we should recruit students not only from our own honors program but from the larger honors college as well. I thought that participating in this effort might be particularly meaningful for students in the experiential and community leadership programs. Expanding our recruitment universe beyond my own school was also necessary because the disaster occurred at the very end of a spring semester so that many in the potential pool of honors students would be graduating or focusing on summer activities and thus not be available for a new service learning opportunity.

Lesson Learned: *If there is more than one honors program at your school, reach out to other programs when designing responses to disasters.*

My first step in actual recruitment was to invite, via email, my own school’s honors students to an information meeting about the program. I then asked the directors of the other honors college programs to give me the names of their students, and with their consents I sent the same email invitation to the other students. I also kept our university’s equivalent of a “dean of students” informed.

I was fortunate to have one student from the experiential learning program (who later was selected for the school of business honors program as well) enthusiastically volunteer to help out even before the information meeting. She proved to be a key participant in a number of respects. She suggested we create some sort of shared site “in the cloud” for everyone to use for communicating. For example, we realized that we would have to have a way to gather information about the needs of those applying for assistance and then share that information among multiple individuals spread across campus. Although her first suggestion was “Google Docs,” we eventually settled on Microsoft’s “SharePoint” collaboration tool. It took a college sophomore to tell the rest of us about “cloud” technology. For information on SharePoint, see <<http://sharepoint.microsoft.com>>. For information on Google Docs, see <<http://docs.google.com>>.

Lesson Learned: *Listen to the students when it comes to using technology to communicate about your project.*

Our experiential learning honors student also agreed to maintain a list of student volunteers responding to the information session emails, including their contact information. This information was loaded into the SharePoint site, which itself was graciously built by individuals in the university's information technology training department who were identified by my project partner in the finance department. Once again, getting this assistance was a product of willingness to ask for help and collaborate.

Before the first information session, I requested that the head of the university's finance department consider providing modest stipends for students who volunteered for the program, and he agreed. We determined that the best way to deliver these stipends was in the form of scholarships deposited directly into the student's financial account with the university. Before the information session, I let students know that these stipends would be available.

Lesson Learned: *Although not all university-affiliated foundations will have such resources, it may be useful to ask yours for scholarship support for service learning activities.*

By the time of the first information meeting with student recruits, my project colleagues and I had settled on the mission, vision, and values statement for the program described above, and we used a PowerPoint presentation to describe them to the students who attended. In particular, we discussed the concepts of "servant leadership" and "social entrepreneurship."

"Servant leadership" is generally associated with the late Robert K. Greenleaf and was described in his essay *The Servant as Leader*, first published in 1970. In that essay and in subsequent books, Greenleaf said that the most effective leaders are servant-leaders; that is, they are servants first and leaders second. For more information, see this website for the Greenleaf Center for Service Leadership: <<http://www.greenleaf.org/whatissl>>. Given that my school's honors program focuses on business leadership, I stress the importance of servant leadership throughout the program, particularly in the course on principles of leadership.

"Social entrepreneurship" refers to the use of entrepreneurial principles, including encouragement of innovation, to address social problems. For an excellent discussion of the role of a university in social entrepreneurship, see *Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century* by Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein. I believe that our program addressed in an entrepreneurial way the myriad social problems created by the disastrous tornadoes.

At our first information meeting with students, we also described the process we had worked out for screening applicants. With one of my colleagues' social work knowledge of how to determine need and with another's extraordinary abilities with Excel, we built a spreadsheet and loaded it on the

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

SharePoint site. The spreadsheet automatically guided users to a determination of whether an applicant should be offered a loan or a grant with our donated funds. For example, the spreadsheet calculated whether an applicant could afford a loan in the first place, based on federal “poverty guidelines.”

For the next several months, we posted information sheets about potential applicants—referred to us by the community’s long-term recovery committee (the meetings of which students occasionally attended)—on the SharePoint site. For example, one human services agency might bring to a committee meeting the file for a family whose needs the agency alone could not immediately meet, and our employee fund administrator would agree to investigate whether our program could meet at least part of those needs.

After someone in the employee fund administration office scanned an information sheet about potential applicants on the SharePoint site, SharePoint then automatically generated email messages to students who had signed up to participate. A student could check out a particular family’s information sheet so that no one else would begin work on it and contact the family, using the contact information provided on the sheet. If a student was unable to follow through with a potential applicant because, for example, he or she was not able to reach the family (a not uncommon occurrence), then SharePoint permitted the information sheet to be checked back in. Other students could then see that the file was available and pursue it themselves.

Students were encouraged to meet in person with the individual named in the information sheet that they had checked out and to work with the individual to complete an application that also was available to all the students on the SharePoint site. One teachable moment that came from this process was the difficulty that many students encountered in communicating with potential clients, often because the clients lacked either their own or other reliable phone or email service, frequently because of damage from the tornadoes.

After students helped clients complete applications, they loaded the signed applications back on the shared site, usually using a scanner in the finance department office. Then, using the Excel spreadsheet my finance colleague had designed, they could use the information provided in the application to determine whether a grant or a loan was appropriate. The same student who checked out the original information sheet and met with the applicant then communicated with the applicant about the results and arranged for a meeting at our partner bank’s designated branch, at which a check would be delivered and, in the case of a loan, a repayment agreement signed. The final step would be the student’s returning the signed repayment agreement to the finance department where it was scanned it into the SharePoint site.

Lesson Learned: *There might be value, even outside of a student project responding to a disaster, for building a shared communication site among students. In addition to SharePoint, Google has a service called “Hangout” that allows video conferencing and other collaboration among groups of up to ten individuals.*

In total about twenty-five students participated in the project, including some recruited from a second round of emails to honors students in the various honors college programs. As is the case with many other group efforts, about 80% of the total student effort in the program was handled by about 20% of the students. Several students expressed interest in participating in the program but asked if they could help out behind the scenes. One student, for example, assisted in building the spreadsheet for maintaining records of loans and grants made.

If I had had time to plan a research study before beginning my recruitment of students, I might also have educated myself on the predictors for students' willingness to engage in service learning. Moely and Ilustre (2011) tested several factors that might affect the attitudes of Tulane University students toward the public service requirement at that school. They found, for example, that women were more positive about the requirement as were students who rated themselves as more religious. Although I cannot say what our participants' degrees of religiosity were, I can say that more women than men participated in our program.

Moely and Ilustre also found that an important predictor for a positive attitude toward the Tulane public service requirement was the extent to which students said in a survey that they enjoyed community involvement, that they felt a connection to their university and its city, or that they had an interest in community work. In particular, students who said that they "actively sought information about political and social issues" (51) were more likely to evaluate the requirement highly and have plans for careers in community work. Had I been able to plan my recruitment, I might have devised a questionnaire for participants in the program that captured these characteristics in order to see if I could confirm this research. I will note, though, that students in our university's honors program that is directed at community leadership were no more represented as volunteers for our program than other students.

Lesson Learned: *If a service learning project is a possibility, consider asking your students to complete a questionnaire in advance that would assess the students' willingness and ability to engage in community service.*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Several tangible learning outcomes were significant among the students who participated in the program. With encouragement from me as my school's business honors program director, three participating students used their experiences as the basis for independent research projects required by my school's honors programs, and at least one student also used his project for the university's community leadership program's project. Each student also had another faculty member as an advisor. In each case, students were required to prepare literature reviews on their topics and then prepare a poster describing the results of their research that was presented at an undergraduate research

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

conference sponsored by my university each year. By coincidence, students delivered these presentations almost exactly one year after the disaster that formed the basis of our program.

The disaster inspired several filmmaking opportunities in the university's media studies program. One of the professors in that program is an advisor to our honors college, and I had encouraged her to recruit both her honors and also non-honors students to use the disaster in her media studies curriculum. One group of her students taught filmmaking to middle school students in a neighborhood affected by the disaster and made a film in which they expressed their feelings about the disaster. The result was a powerful expression of the middle school students' fears that their neighborhood might be changed forever.

Another media studies student prepared a film focusing just on our loan program and featuring the students who had participated. All of the films were shown in a one-year commemoration of the disaster at our city's science center, which received coverage from external media <http://www.birminghamtimesonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8717:uab-film-students-help-youngest-tornado-victims-heal&catid=35:local-news-headlines&Itemid=95>. The students participating in the loan program itself were also featured in our university's own media <<http://www.uab.edu/uabmagazine/fall2011/features/lesson>>.

Lesson Learned: *If your school has a media studies program, consider discussing with its faculty in advance the possibility of involving media studies students in any disaster response project.*

Had I been better able to plan the students' involvement in the loan program, I would have asked that they contemporaneously write reflectively on their experiences or perhaps prepare their own audio or video recordings that would have required some degree of introspection. Research shows the value of reflection generally, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Chretien et al.). Regarding service learning, Eyler and Giles have noted that students engaged in service learning are more likely to see changes in their higher-order thinking and to apply their knowledge to new situations if they not only engage in service but also reflect on it. The students who prepared independent projects based on their participation in the program did have opportunities to reflect, even if not in traditional journal form.

Lesson Learned: *Have a reflective writing exercise, such as a journal, ready to go in advance of a disaster response program. A shared site could be used for such a purpose, and the reflections could take the form of a shared blog. Blackboard Learn has such functionality.*

We did not survey survivors who received help from our program, but several were interviewed as part of the media stories described above. All reported positive experiences with students. In a future program, I would design a more formal means of obtaining feedback. Although our students did not interact much with external human services agencies, if they had done so I might have also designed a survey of those agencies' satisfaction levels with the students. Ferrari and Worrall have researched the views of external agencies in service learning projects and found, for example, that what agencies value most in students are the strategic values of empathy with clients: being sensitive to the needs of clients, being friendly toward clients and staff, and seeming to be interested in providing services to clients (38).

Another survey that we might have undertaken but did not do formally would have been to assess our donors' satisfaction with our results. We did, though, periodically keep our donors apprised, in "stewardship" reports, as to the number of students participating, the number of clients served, and the dollars distributed.

Lesson Learned: *Consider surveying those who benefit from your program, as well as donors and those people or agencies with whom students work, to determine their level of satisfaction with the program.*

CONCLUSION

As with all teaching activities, this service learning project taught me as much as it taught the students. For other teachers of honors students considering service learning projects, I offer the following guidance:

BE READY TO RESPOND TO THE UNEXPECTED

Although no one wants storms and other natural events to strike and to serve as the basis for service learning, we should be aware that such events do occur and that our students can learn from addressing the problems they create. We should also remember Voltaire's admonishment that "The perfect is the enemy of the good" and not assume that a great deal of advance planning is always necessary for a successful project.

DO WHAT YOU CAN IN ADVANCE

If you think you might want to create some sort of service learning experience for your students following a disaster big or small, consider the following: (1) if your school has an employee assistance fund, identify the person who administers that fund and discuss whether he or she would be willing and able to work with you in response to a disaster affecting employees; (2) do the same with external human service agencies that might be most likely to respond to a disaster (such as the Red Cross); (3) with the assistance of your development office, identify donors who might be interested in providing some sort of

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

financial support for a student response like funding grants or loans to survivors; (4) at the start of each semester, poll students about their willingness and ability to participate in any response program, perhaps using the questionnaires on service learning described above; and (5) ask a student to build an electronic shared communication site with the names and email addresses of students who would want to participate. Such steps might be most appropriate for honors programs spanning multiple semesters.

BE AWARE OF NON-FINANCIAL RESPONSES

Not every response to a disaster has to focus on financial needs. For example, if your school has an employee assistance fund, the administrator of that fund might simply need extra manpower to respond to employees who have been affected, using existing resources. Students might also volunteer at different human services agencies and compare notes on the differing methods used to help survivors of the event, making recommendations on which have been most effective; this might help achieve the objectives of the “social justice” model of student service learning described above.

PREPARE A STRATEGIC PLAN

Defining the mission, vision, and values is as valuable a process for ensuring the success of a service learning project as it is for a business. In particular, while I was not able to do so, involving students in the strategic planning process would be both a team-building as well as active-learning experience for them.

COLLABORATE

The Chinese have a well-developed sense of the importance of building relationships to achieve their professional and personal goals, called “guanxi.” Our project not only served to show students the importance of collaboration, internal and external, but perhaps also demonstrated some of the inherent inefficiencies in a community’s response to an extraordinary natural disaster.

BE PREPARED TO PROCEED WITHOUT MUCH DIRECTION

Neither our wonderful donors nor my school or university administration had much direction to give me on exactly how we would help the survivors of the tornadoes. Such a situation is reminiscent of “skunkworks,” which are testing grounds at some businesses to encourage innovation without the burden of supervision. Both Paul Strong and Michael Cundall have described how honors programs can be such testing grounds for innovative practices.

LISTEN TO THE STUDENTS

The students we recruited for our project were considerably savvier than I was in the technology that helped us achieve the mission of the project. In

particular, the use of the SharePoint site that we created was useful for collaboration among the students, who were dispersed across campus.

ASSESS YOUR STUDENTS ON THEIR SERVICE LEARNING COMMITMENT

If you are considering a service learning project for your students, consider using the types of assessments described by Moely and Illustre to measure their attitudes, knowledge, and skills for community engagement. For projects not undertaken in response to unexpected disasters such as ours, some leaders might design research protocols in advance to explore whether the same predictors found by Moely and Illustre for community engagement among the entire population of a university are as valid in your honors program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank my daughter, Caroline Yoder Cohen, A.B., M.S., for her assistance in the research and editing of this article.

REFERENCES

- Brush, David R, Ronald J. Markert, and Cathy J. Lazarus. "The Relationship Between Service Learning and Medical Student Academic and Professional Outcomes." *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 18.1 (2010): 9–13.
- Chretien, Katherine C., Shobhina G. Chheda, Dario Torra, and Klara K. Papp. "Reflective Writing in the Internal Medicine Clerkship: A National Survey of Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine." *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 24.1 (2012): 42–48.
- Crenson, Matthew A. and Benjamin Ginsberg. *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Cundall, Michael. "Service Learning and Skunkworks in a Senior Honors Colloquium." *Honors in Practice* 6 (2010): 117–123.
- Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002.
- Eyler Janet, and Dwight W. Giles, Jr.. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1999.
- Ferrari, Joseph R. and Laurie Worrall. "Assessments by Community Agencies: How the 'Other Side' Sees Service-Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 7(2000): 35–40.
- Moely, Barbara E. and Vincent Illustre. "University Students' Views of a Public Service Graduation Requirement." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 17.2 (2011): 43–58.
- Porter, Judith R., Mary Summers, Suzanne Toton, and Hillary Aisenstein. "Service-Learning With a Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign: Community

RESPONDING TO DISASTER WITH A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

and Student Benefits." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14.2 (2008): 66–75.

Reed, Pamela G. "Scholarly Reflection on Nursing Practice: Undergraduate Student Discoveries from Four Case Studies." *Journal of Undergraduate Nursing Scholarship*: 9.1 (2007). <<http://www.juns.nursing.arizona.edu/articles/Fall%202007/Scholarly%20reflection.htm>>

Strong, Paul. "Honors as Skunkworks." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 7.1 (2006): 53–55.

Thorp, Holden and Buck Goldstein. *Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

The author may be contacted at
syoder@uab.edu.