

Every Day Earth Day

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In the Spring 2014 semester, we completed a service learning project as part of a *Project Management* course at the University of Idaho. This class taught us about non-profits, recycling and reusing waste, how waste disposal works in small communities, and how to work with project team members who are not co-located with our team.

Service learning is a real-life learning experience that goes above and beyond the classroom learning environment. It involves learning through serving the community, combined with classroom instruction. Service learning integrates classroom ideas and curriculum with serving the community (University of Idaho 2014).

For our service learning project, we worked with Idaho County Recycling Committee (ICR) to organize, plan, and host an Earth Day event. This event was organized to raise awareness about the benefits and importance of recycling within the community.

Idaho County Recycling is a nonprofit organization run by volunteers. It is a recycling program in three of Idaho's small rural communities: Grangeville, Kooskia, and Cottonwood. A very small percentage of families and individuals in the communities participate in recycling because it is inconvenient. Most individuals have to drive many miles to bring their recyclable materials to the ICR sites. Therefore, most individuals do not have the time or energy to recycle. Idaho County Recycling has worked for two years to raise awareness of the impact recycling can have for the communities and to involve more local organizations in helping the recycling efforts. These local organizations include the high schools and junior highs, clubs, and Boy and Girl Scouts. In ICR's first two years of operation, it collected over 500 tons of recycled material (KP Design Co. 2013).

The *Project Management* class has been taught as a service-learning course at the University of Idaho since 2009 and is open to any student with junior standing or above. The course teaches tools and techniques to manage projects in any type of organization. Students work in teams to complete projects for community partners. All projects fulfill several course learning objectives, including to "participate in a project team which uses the tools, methods, and processes taught in this course to manage a project from initiation through closure." Each student is expected to spend 30 to 40 hours participating in project work over the semester. Several project deliverables relate to what is learned in the class, including: a charter, risk register, project plan (using MS Project), and a project fair at the end of the semester, where the results of the projects are presented to students, faculty, administrators, and project sponsors.

Our instructor, Professor Lee, found four projects for the 2014 spring class. The project sponsors came to class one day and presented their project ideas. We had a chance to talk with sponsors after the presentation and to ask questions and get a better understanding of the project, so we could choose the project that fit us best. These were all large projects; ours was the smallest, with only eight students. Professor Lee required us to meet with our sponsor within a week of picking the project, to gather information to write our project charter. The charter included the problem statement, the goal, project scope, and other project information that our team could only learn about from the sponsor. The recycling committee was made up of representatives from the three communities, and our sponsor was our only contact with it. With our sponsor living two hours away, we quickly learned there would be unique challenges with

our project. For example, most communication had to be conducted over email or phone. It took a while for our team to understand what the sponsor required and agree on a contract. Because our sponsor was the only contact with the recycling committee, voids in information between our group and the recycling committee were created. As the project went on, this became apparent. There were multiple proposed changes to the project scope throughout the project. If we had it to do over again, we would find a way to meet with the whole committee. We could have used Skype or video conference call, although some recycling committee members may not have had access to some of these technologies. Sending representatives from our group to one of the ICR committee meetings could have helped as well.

The Earth Day project appealed to our team because it allowed us to help raise awareness and educate communities about the importance of recycling. Two of our team members grew up in Idaho County, and this project also offered a way to give back to their communities. For these two group members the project was more personal. These two members worked hand in hand with members of their communities who had influenced their own lives growing up. These relationships gave our group a head start. Finding locations to hold the events and contacts to help promote the events became easier by knowing who to contact and how to contact them. One of the two members had even helped create a recycling program while in high school.

Our role as the project management group working with ICR was to create a fun interactive learning experience based around Earth Day for community members. The Earth Day event was focused on the youth of the communities, but also had information booths and activities geared toward all ages. In the beginning stages of the event preparation, we met with the ICR site leaders to learn what their expectations and goals for each event site were. Each ICR site leader was a local member of one of the three communities where an event site was located. We discovered ICR's main goal was to raise awareness about recycling in Idaho County. ICR felt one of the best ways to achieve this was by promoting Idaho county recycling through the Earth Day event. We discussed with ICR our specific role for the Earth Day event. From this discussion, we drafted a charter that held us accountable to provide the following at each of the three sites: organize at least one activity, implement two forms of advertising, and help run the Earth Day event. The event sites were located between one and a half hours and two hours away, which we would have to drive to on the day of the event. A sub group of our project management group worked with each ICR site leader to help plan and hold the event. This is where we feel the voids in communication began to become apparent. There seemed to be little communication between the site leaders. This led to different expectations for our project management group at each site.

We brainstormed as a group and decided on a few activities such as a recycling game where kids sorted various recyclables as quickly as possible, placing the correct material in the corresponding bin. Other activities included soccer bowling and composting booths. We also had craft tables which allowed the kids to make an assortment of crafts from recyclables, such as colored CD wind chimes, recycled magazine bracelets, recycled wine cork key chains, and shopping bags out of old T-shirts. We also had information booths on the benefits of up-cycling and recycling (reduce, reuse, and recycle) showing how everyone can be involved. Another event included a photo competition, where people took pictures of the event and submitted them to ICR's Facebook page; three winners were chosen and each received a \$15 gift card to a local coffee shop. This was a good way to promote ICR's goals and further gain more community involvement because it gave ICR a bigger web presence and the ability to reach out to more people throughout the communities.

Through this service learning project we were able to connect with community organizations including the Boy Scouts and recycling clubs in the local high schools by working with them to help provide games and activities at the event. We were also able to integrate the classroom objectives into our Earth Day event. These classroom objectives included using MS Project software to create a timeline and assign tasks and identifying and managing project risks with a Risk Register. While our team understood in theory the benefits of recycling, reducing, and reusing materials, after this project and much discussion with ICR committee members, we learned much more about recycling. We learned the sheer volume of recyclable content which is being sent to landfills every year by small communities, and how substantial the costs of taking waste to a landfill are for small communities like those in Idaho County. Beyond reducing waste in a landfill, reducing the amount of garbage that has to be hauled to a landfill saves money. Idaho County charges its residents a fee to collect garbage, which is related to how much trash is collected. Any reduction in the amount of trash means the county's tax bill can be reduced, or the money can be repurposed.

Although our main purpose for the project was recycling, it is not the first step to becoming a green planet. Rather the first two steps are to reduce and reuse. To reduce means to use less of a material, for example instead of using cases of water bottles use one water filter. To reuse means to use an item or material over and over again. An example of this is taking a water bottle and refilling it multiple times. Once these two steps are complete and cannot be refined anymore, one can now recycle. These were two points we tried to portray through our information booth at each event site.

Achieving the classroom objectives allowed us to fully expand on the necessity and purpose of the project. The overall outcome of our project was a success, with a few areas that we need to work on. Our Earth Day event turned out very well with the activities and information booths, but attendance was slightly lower than anticipated. We planned on 60 people at each site and instead had 30-40 people. After reviewing the attendance, we have concluded that we should have advertised more and held the event on a different weekend. On the day of the event two of the communities held Easter egg hunts. We hoped the increase of people in town for the Easter egg hunt would bring more people to our event. This worked well in one community but had a negative effect in the other two. In the community that had better success, the Earth Day event was in the same park as the Easter egg hunt. This made it easy for people to go to both events. If we were to do it again we would do more research to find out if other community events are occurring at the same time. If so, we could then maybe reach out and combine events. Also, after analyzing our event, we concluded that it may have been helpful to research more about these small communities. If we would have interviewed some of the locals and investigated more deeply, we may have learned more about why these communities tend to recycle less and how we can reach them in a more productive way. Also, after analyzing our results, we concluded that service learning projects may be more productive if they are in locations closer to campus. This can allow better communication and more marketing capabilities.

Our team made a difference in these communities by taking valuable time to present information to these small towns about the importance of recycling. The information presented at the event raised awareness of recycling and allowed the communities to begin to think of more ways that they can recycle and more ways to reach their local community members. Our team played a key role in setting the wheels in motion for the Earth Day event to become an annual event. Even with slightly lower attendance than our goal, as well as ICR's goal, raising

awareness about the importance of recycling was met on a fundamental level. We were unable to immediately see how large of an impact we made in the communities. Although we do know we had an impact. We helped ICR break the ground in creating an annual Earth Day event to continue raising awareness about the benefits of recycling and how to get involved in the county's recycling program; ICR opened up its fourth recycling site this summer. We held an event which educated and entertained, helping the people who came to the event understand the implications of recycling within their communities. These individuals can now share what they learned with friends and family, broadening the impact and raising awareness even more.

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References:

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