

Suits – Developing Consulting-Based Service-Oriented HR Programs to Create the Next Generation of HR Professionals

Bernd Kupka¹, Jonathan H. Westover²

¹ Radford University, United States

² Western Governors University, United States

Corresponding E-mail: bkupka@radford.edu

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Abstract

This article explores the integration of service-learning (SL) with a consulting approach within human resources (HR) education programs in higher education. We highlight the nature and importance of this andragogical approach, examining how it bridges the theory-practice gap, cultivates professional competencies, fosters civic engagement, and enhances student motivation and satisfaction. The article delves into the reasons why HR education is particularly well-suited for SL with a consulting approach, including the emphasis on people-oriented skills, the multi-disciplinary nature of HR, and the alignment with HR roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, we outline the critical roles of key stakeholders, including students, faculty, community partners, university administration, and professional associations, in the successful implementation of such programs. Finally, we provide practical guidance on program-building within HR curricula, highlighting a successful case study that demonstrates the tangible outcomes and positive impact of this innovative approach to HR education.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Social Learning, HR Education, Program Development, HR Curricula

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In the TV-show “Suits” (Korsh & Smith, 2011), in which legal consultants provide services to clients, one of the key characters, Harvey Specter, teaches his protégé, Michael Ross, the

ins and outs of successful consulting in a hands-on way. Every episode, in an experiential way Mike learns another skill, aspect of business, way of handling a specific client, or method of

delivering results. In the end, through many trials and turbulations, Mike Ross emerges as a highly successful, decisive, resourceful, independent, and impactful legal consultant.

As experienced human resources (HR) professors, researchers, and practitioners, we have witnessed the transformative impact of this teaching method, often referred to as service-learning (SL). Throughout our careers, we have had the privilege of participating in the development of the next generation of HR leaders through the integration of SL into HR education, and the results have been nothing short of remarkable. Over the years, we have conceptualized, implemented, refined, and integrated our own “Suits” in the form of Service-learning Utility In Transforming Students (SUITs). The unique blend of experiential learning, community engagement, and professional consulting skills SUITs offers aligns seamlessly with the multi-faceted nature of human resources. Human Resources, as a discipline, is deeply rooted in understanding and balancing the complex needs of people within and in contrast to the organizational context. It is a field that requires not only technical expertise, but also a keen sense of social awareness, strategic problem-solving, and the ability to navigate the evolving landscape of work.

In this article, we will explore the nature and importance of service-learning with a consulting approach and delve into the reasons HR education lends itself particularly well to this andragogical model. We will examine the critical roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the success of SUITs programs. We will also provide practical guidelines for building successful HR curricula with a SUITs approach in higher education. By highlighting key considerations, such as curricular integration, community partnerships, structured reflection, faculty development, and assessment mechanisms, we aim to equip HR educators with the necessary tools and insights to seamlessly incorporate SUITs into their academic offerings.

In the cumulative 25+ years of experience in high-impact SUITs HR education, we

developed a passion to share our insights and best practices to inspire and guide others in this transformative journey. We have an opportunity to embrace SL as a powerful tool for developing the HR leaders of tomorrow, who are technically proficient, socially conscious, strategically agile, and committed to making a lasting impact. This needs a sound theoretical footing, which we delineate next.

The Nature and Theory of Service-Learning with a Consulting Approach

Service-learning is an educational approach that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Heriot, Cook, Jones, & Simpson, 2008). Additionally, SL has shown to assist in the development of analytical and creative solution-finding skills (Litzky et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2010). When combined with a consulting approach, SL unlocks even greater potential for student growth and community impact through broad personal, social, learning, and career development outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 2001; Soliman, Stainton, & Chamberlain, 2021).

The SUITs approach involves students taking on the role of “apprentice consultants,” applying their knowledge and skills to address real-world challenges faced by organizations or communities. This approach fosters the development of observation, intelligent question-asking, listening, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership abilities - all highly sought-after skills in the HR field (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Duchatelet, Cornelissen, & Volman, 2024; Hulaikah, Sudana Degeng, Sulton, & Murwani, 2020; Kupka, Westover, & Workman, 2016).

The importance of a SUITs approach in HR education lies in its ability to:

Bridge the theory-practice gap: SL programs allow students to apply HR concepts and theories to real-world situations, reinforcing their learning and preparing them for the realities of the workplace (Matook, Wang, & Axelsen, 2025).

Cultivate professional competencies: The consulting aspect of SL programs develops students' abilities to analyze complex problems, offer strategic recommendations, and effectively communicate with diverse stakeholders (Okorley, Mensah & Amoah-Mensah, 2024).

Foster civic engagement and social responsibility: By working directly with community partners, students gain a deeper understanding of social issues and their role as HR professionals in creating positive change (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2003).

Enhance student motivation, satisfaction, and retention: The hands-on, applied nature of SL programs can increase student engagement, leading to higher levels of learning and a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment (Heinrich, Louson, Blommel, & Green, 2021).

Generate good will in the business community: The tax-paying business community, which supports higher education, can significantly financially benefit from a deep-seated, competent, and comprehensive SL curriculum in which faculty-mentored student consultants originate innovative ideas with a bottom-line impact, in some cases in the multi-million-dollar range through significant reductions in turnover expenses, for instance. In turn, this will generate mutually beneficial outcomes for institutions of higher education, students, and faculty through donations which can turn into scholarships for economically disadvantaged students; the development of talent pipelines for local, regional, and national well-paying jobs; as well as recognition for placement success, excellent alumni networks, and new project opportunities due to reputational success.

This innovative andragogical model offers a transformative learning experience that empowers students by:

- building on their own professional experiences and applying newly acquired skills and knowledge to real-world pain points seen in actual organizations,

- cultivating essential professional competencies,
- fostering a deeper sense of civic engagement and social responsibility, and
- enhancing their overall motivation and satisfaction.

By seamlessly integrating real-world challenges and community partnerships into the curriculum, HR programs can equip the next generation of HR professionals with the knowledge, skills, and social awareness needed to drive positive change within organizations and communities (Anderson, Coleman-King, Wallace, & Harper, 2022).

Methods and models how to equip students with relevant competencies of consulting as a profession have been identified by Kupka, Westover, and Workman (2016). They build the Consulting Competence House, which consists of eleven building blocks. Each component fulfills a critical role in achieving the eventual goal of consultants – to assist clients to reach their desired business outcomes. The eleven elements are:

Foreign language competence – mastering the vocabulary of the trade, starting with project management lingo, adding the subject matter specific terminology, and expanding to customer service language, are critical elements of successfully guiding clients through the process (Gass & Varonis, 1991).

Non-verbal communication competence – especially in today's social interaction deprived environments where isolation is a major challenge resulting in more and more students lacking fundamental skills in reading nonverbal signals of their counterparts, it is deeply critical for students to build competence and confidence in reading their consulting clients correctly, from physical appearance, to para-verbal, to extra-verbal communication, to proxemics, to haptics, to oculosics and chronemics (Burgoon, 1994; Molinsky et al., 2005).

Perception of cultural distance – organizations, industries, geographic regions, countries, and people have their unique set of rules and guidelines for culturally appropriate and effective behavior for participants in social exchanges, including consultants. Kupka, Westover, and Workman state:

“In order for consultants to be able to work successfully within the cultural make-up of a client organization, they ought to be able to detect the cultural differences between client companies.” (p. 182)

Students who have developed more acute observation, question-asking, and listening skills will become better consultants by picking up stories, cultural artefacts, designs, and interaction patterns in organizations more accurately and making better decisions in their consulting services (Earley, 2002).

Cultural self-awareness – in recent years, cultural aspects of individuality and identity have become more pronounced in many Western societies. These cultural idiosyncrasies have the potential to influence student consultants’ perceptions of organizational practices and policies, which in turn can affect their effectiveness as consultants. It’s imperative for SL programs to expose students to a broad range of scenarios for students to figure out their own ethical and practical boundaries and sharpen their observational, inquisitive, and listening skills (Baker & Comer, 2012). Frequent and regular reflection opportunities for students in this process are critical for self-discovery and -modulation as individuals and consultants and need to be guided and promoted by SL faculty members (Gibson, 2006).

Consulting knowledge – becoming a subject matter expert via the acquisition of critical, consulting-relevant, and client-specific knowledge is a fundamental part of becoming a competent consultant in any field (Spitzberg, 2000). Faculty members in SL programs can develop “starter’s packages” through open-source materials that allow students to obtain subject matter expertise for any project. In HR

education programs, such materials can come from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), government websites such as the Department of Labor or the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and also more niche and regional organizations, such as the Intermountain Compensation & Benefits Association or HR Message Boards. Not only should HR student consultants be encouraged to become members of these organizations and boards, frequent these websites, and become voracious consumers of such materials, but in classroom discussions, faculty members need to put the information into project-relevant contexts and show sample applications (Kisamore, 2008; Martin, 2014).

Consulting skills – the skill sets student consultants need to develop to become competent HR consultants is broad, diverse, and multi-faceted. This non-exhaustive and incomplete list starts with simple and seemingly commonplace but widely under-developed skills, such as observation, asking intelligent questions, and listening. More technical skills, such as data collection and analysis, are also required. Specific consulting skills, such as keeping track of billable hours, capturing a client through an elevator pitch, and developing a consulting proposal are essential. Lastly, general business skills, such as presenting results, networking, business etiquette, and holding company-specific inquiries are also necessary. It is advisable to design tests to measure the development of consulting skills over the course of a program with pre- and post-assessments (Pless et al., 2011).

Consulting motivation – Spitzberg (2000) outlines how knowledge and skills alone will not get the job done – motivation to use the knowledge and skills is the defining element. Consequently, it is imperative for HR faculty members to facilitate the development of high levels of (self-)trust student consultants have in the validity and pertinence of their consulting knowledge and skills. Methodologically, HR faculty need to devise a progression of steps students need to master to trust themselves increasingly to confidently apply their knowledge and skills. Starting with small group projects in which consulting work is done with two to three

consulting colleagues with frequent feedback and self-reflection in a typical SL-based Introduction to HR class to the eventual single, fully integrated consulting project a capstone class student can manage with high degrees of efficacy and confidence builds motivation, success, and a commitment to excellence (Kong, 2021; Marcinkus Murphy, 2011). In this context, it is important to point out how students need to be both challenged in and shown boundaries of ethical consulting (Baker & Comer, 2012). Hyper-confidence, lack of experience and missing vital cues, deception, and the presentation of “alternative facts” needs to be discussed in the course of an SL HR program to alert students to their need for continuous learning beyond the classroom, ethical business behavior on both sides (consultant AND client), and a level of humility which will be well-received by clients, co-workers, and supervisors. HR faculty should serve as advisors and mentors in this context (Kim, 2007).

Consulting effectiveness – getting the job done, that is the goal for every (student) consultant. To complete goals takes tremendous dedication and energy. In our practitioner experience, post-COVID students often lack clarity, focus, and drive to commit themselves to the meticulous and high-quality completion of assignments of any kind, let alone challenging and potentially intimidating projects in SL programs. Students need to see the big picture of how their projects fits into their client’s business environment, how it affects their opportunities to earn an internship or job with the client company at the successful conclusion of the project, and how the project impacts a community. Upon understanding these aspects of a project, students are more likely to utilize relevant and useful resources, build synergies with partners, and incorporate additional learning opportunities the client, university, or program offers them to accomplish their goals (Watson, Morgan, Kendal, Van de Vyver, & Kendal, 2021). HR faculty members in well-developed SL programs bring these insights, resources, and opportunities together and explain and let students explore

them for the benefit of all stakeholders (Demerouti, 2011).

Consulting appropriateness – while getting the job done is the goal, not violating rules, or being appropriate, is the process. Both play vital roles in the competence levels of student consultants (Spitzberg, 2000). The recognition of and adherence to rules is of critical importance – rules of the trade (of consulting), rules of a client company, rules of a cultural group (of customers), rules of an industry, rules of government, etc. all need to be explained to student consultants and taken into consideration during the completion of an SL project. These legal and ethical aspects of consulting are not always easy to detect, understand, and implement, regardless of competence levels a consultant has acquired (Westphal & Stern, 2007). Student consultants, however, struggle more with their levels of appropriateness due to typically lower degrees of life and business experience. One way to train observation skills, reflect on concepts, and develop more appropriateness is through watching assignments, such as movies and TV-shows (Itzhakov, Weinstein & Cheshin, 2022). For consultants, one possible option of a suitable TV-show is *Suits* (Korsh & Smith, 2011-2019) in which legal consultants display many (in)effective, (in)appropriate, skillful, knowledgeable, motivated, and perceptual consulting actions. Students can observe and listen to these scenarios and through guided reflections learn from them to adopt and refine their consulting approach.

Contextual interaction patterns – as students in SL-based HR programs complete multiple consulting projects, not only will their knowledge bases, skill & motivation levels, degrees of effectiveness and appropriateness, as well as perceptual and awareness points change and improve, but also their interaction patterns with clients will change. The interactional pattern gamut reaches from more faculty-facilitated, highly formal, mostly technology-enabled/non-personal, and infrequent contacts often seen in foundational classes, such as an Introduction to HR class, to more immediate, somewhat

informal, mostly personal, and frequent interactions in capstone HR courses (Kupka & Phillips, 2005). Students need to be guided during this journey of experiences and various professional mentors, from faculty members, HR professionals, and business owners, as well as regularly facilitated reflections upon their experiences can enhance the development of student consulting competence.

Consulting Affinity – finally, the level of consulting affinity can regulate the level of motivation, dedication, and completion of a consulting projects in students who have not yet developed high degrees of business maturity and professionalism (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990). In today's highly divided society, students who have a high aversion against industries such as oil and gas, food production, pharmaceuticals, or environmental protection might be less inclined to participate (with a high level of enthusiasm) in any consulting projects and might even reject the consulting career path. Parallel and directly related, faculty also need to monitor their consulting affinity and demonstrate a high degree of open-mindedness, professionalism, and flexibility in their affinity in order to pass on to their students these attitudes. Closing doors to potential clients purely due to their industry, business culture, client base, or other characteristics is problematic on multiple levels – this participation in what is called “cancel culture” can exclude groups of employees highly in need of help; can prevent important solutions for societal or communal problems from being discovered, discussed, and resolved; or can eliminate new approaches to problematic business practices after leadership changes. Blindly rejecting entire industries, companies, or other entities purely based on affinity is also bad business practice from a revenue and profit perspective. Simultaneously, however, this also offers the opportunity to discuss ethical conundrums in the consulting industry and how students can maneuver them.

In summary, as can be seen in Figure 1, the *Consulting Competence House* is a neatly assembled model of what students should

acquire over time through SL projects in experience-based HR curricula:

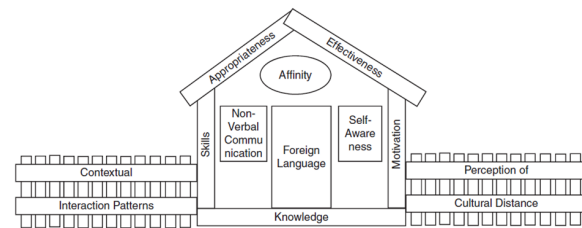


Figure 1: The Consulting Competence House (see Kupka, Westover, & Workman, 2016)

As HR educators with a SUITS mentality, we have a responsibility to prepare our students not only for the technical demands of the field, but also for the evolving role of HR in addressing complex social issues and creating a more profitable and prosperous workforce. The following section describes how HR educators can fulfill this crucial mission in a structured HR curriculum at the undergraduate level of higher education.

Why HR Education Lends Itself to Service-Learning

The field of human resources management (HRM) education is particularly well-suited for the integration of a SUITS consulting approach. This section will explore the key reasons why HR education lends itself so effectively to this innovative pedagogical model. These reasons include:

Emphasis on People-Oriented Skills: At the core of HR is the ability to understand, engage, and support people within an organizational context. Service-learning programs allow students to develop critical people-oriented skills, such as observation, asking intelligent questions, listening, empathy, and change management.

Multi-Disciplinary Nature: HRM encompasses a wide range of functions, from recruitment and training to employee relations, and organizational development. This breadth lends itself well to SL projects that can draw on various disciplines and perspectives. Even classes such as Total Compensation, HR Information Systems, and HR Data Analytics can be included

in a comprehensive SL curriculum once projects in other, less technical and legally sensitive HR subject matters, have been sufficiently successful completed and a broad enough client network has been established.

Alignment with HR Roles and Responsibilities: Many HR functions, such as talent management, employee engagement, and organizational effectiveness, involve diagnosing issues, proposing solutions, and implementing change – aligning closely with the consulting approach in SL.

Commitment to Social Responsibility: HR professionals play a crucial role in fostering inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible organizational cultures. SL programs allow students to explore the intersections between HR and social impact.

The multi-faceted nature of HR, with its emphasis on people-oriented skills, alignment with core job functions, and commitment to social responsibility, makes it an ideal domain for the incorporation of service-learning with a consulting approach. By leveraging this synergistic relationship, SUTS programs in HR education can effectively bridge the theory-practice gap, cultivate essential professional competencies, and foster a deeper sense of civic engagement among students. Students, however, are not the only stakeholders affected by SUTS methods. We will highlight all stakeholders in the following section.

Roles of All Stakeholders

The success of SUTS programs in HR education relies on the active engagement and collaboration of a diverse set of stakeholders (Chong, Anderson, Mackenzie-Stewart, Hobbs, & Conna, 2022; Sanders Via, 2024). This section will explore the critical roles and responsibilities of each key player in ensuring the success and sustainability of these transformative learning experiences. Key stakeholders include:

Students: Students are the primary beneficiaries of SL programs, gaining hands-on experience, professional competencies, and a

deeper understanding of their role as HR professionals. Their participation, commitment, and reflection are essential for the program's success.

Faculty: Faculty members are the architects and facilitators of SL programs, responsible for designing the curriculum, identifying community partners, and guiding students through the learning process. They must possess the necessary expertise in both HR and SL andragogy. In this andragogical approach, faculty need to draw in work experiences of students in order to not only bridge the theory-practice-gap, but also to give students meaningful, applicable learning outcomes which resonate long-term with students beyond their time in the HR program into their careers.

Community Partners: Community partners, such as nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, or government agencies, provide the real-world challenges and contexts for SL projects. Their involvement ensures the relevance and impact of the program.

University Administration: The university administration plays a crucial role in supporting SL programs, providing resources, securing partnerships, and championing the integration of SL within the HR curriculum. This also includes the building of trusting relationships between administrators and faculty members. Teachers need to have a degree of freedom in building the client network, generating student consulting projects, nurturing client relationships appropriately, and presenting findings to clients in highly professional settings. Administrators need to learn to “let go” and give their faculty members the freedom to work with HR professionals in local, regional, and national companies. Cooperatively setting guidelines, boundaries, and success metrics can facilitate trust, accountability, and success.

Professional Associations: Professional associations, such as the Society for Human Resource Management and/or the HR Certification Institute (HRCI), need to be integrated to provide guidelines, resources, and

networking opportunities to strengthen the connections between academia and industry. Additionally, enhancing employability of students by helping students earn professional certifications, such as the aPHR from HRCI, are a tremendous benefit for students and HR programs. Aggregate feedback on content mastery of students sitting for the aPHR exam from HRCI can guide program content and methods to meet industry expectations for skill sets and knowledge bases students need to be professionally ready for their HR jobs (Grossman Jr., 2002). Furthermore, professional SHRM members can volunteer to be mentors to students not just while they are working on class consulting projects but also for career choices, skill development, networking, and professionalism. This should generate mutually satisfying relationships, especially if the HR professionals originate from the alumni network of the HR program. This would be an opportunity for alumni to give back to the program that spawned their successful career, build long-term connections, and offer superior learning opportunities for faculty members to obtain up-to-date industry best practices from their former students.

The effective implementation of SUITS programs demands a multi-stakeholder approach in which all need to come together in a collaborative effort to facilitate the success and long-term sustainability of such transformative HR programs. By fostering strong partnerships, aligning objectives, and leveraging the unique strengths and resources of each stakeholder, SUITS HR programs can unlock the full potential of SL to develop the next generation of HR professionals. How to build such impactful SUITS HR programs is the focus of the next section in this article.

Program Building for HR Programs in Higher Education

Developing successful SUITS programs within HR curricula in higher education requires a thoughtful and collaborative approach. We now outline key considerations and best practices HR

programs with a SUITS mentality should adopt in their academic offerings. They include:

Stakeholder Collaboration: Foster ongoing collaboration and communication among all stakeholders, including students, faculty, community partners, and university administration, to ensure alignment, shared ownership, and continuous improvement.

Curricular Integration: Seamlessly integrate SL projects and experiences into core HR courses, ensuring that the learning objectives, activities, and assessments are aligned with the course content and program goals.

Community Partnerships: Establish strong partnerships with community organizations that can provide meaningful and relevant SL opportunities for students. Regularly evaluate and refine these partnerships to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes. These partners can be for-profit, non-profit, non-governmental, and other types of organizations. At Utah Valley University, we have built a network of over 400 client organizations from all walks of life just in Utah and Salt Lake Valleys alone. Additionally, through the International Human Resource Management class, we have also global community partners in Canada, New Zealand, Germany, France, and Costa Rica.

Structured Reflection: Incorporate structured reflection activities throughout the SL experience, encouraging students to critically analyze their learning, professional development, and the impact of their work on the community.

Faculty Development: Invest in faculty development opportunities to ensure that instructors are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively design, implement, and assess SL programs.

Assessment and Continuous Improvement: Implement robust assessment mechanisms to measure the program's impact on student learning, community engagement, and the overall development of HR competencies. Use these insights to continuously refine and enhance the program.

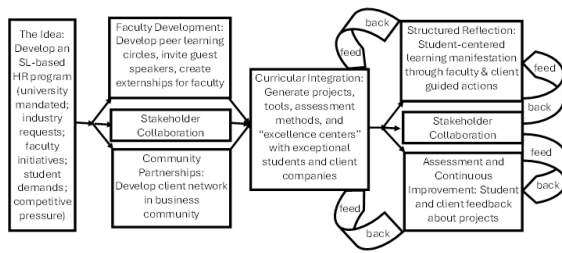


Figure 2: Program Building for HR Programs in Higher Education

Integrating this holistic and collaborative SUITS approach into HR programs in higher education is a complex, but highly rewarding, endeavor. By carefully considering the critical factors outlined above, HR programs can create transformative learning experiences that empower the next generation of HR professionals to become agents of positive change within organizations and communities. A SUITS program implementation is a strategic investment that will yield dividends in the form of highly skilled and purpose-driven HR leaders. Next, we showcase a successful SUITS HR program at Utah Valley University together with a checklist for faculty inclined to build their own HR programs with a consulting approach.

A Successful Case Study: SUITS in HR at Utah Valley University

Utah Valley University's (UVU) HR program has emerged as a leader of SUITS experiences in HR curricula. We have implemented SUITS methods across multiple program courses, empowering students to work solo and in teams and consult with local organizations to address a diverse range of HR-related challenges.

The Process:

At the heart of this SUITS program is a structured multi-step process that prepares students for the consulting role. First, students undergo comprehensive training in essential consulting skills, including problem-solving, data analysis, and effective client communication. This foundational training equips them with the necessary tools and mindset to engage with community partners in a professional and impactful manner.

Once equipped with these crucial consulting skills, students are paired with or required to find their own local, regional, or national client organizations and tasked with understanding the client's needs, conducting thorough assessments, and developing tailored recommendations to address the identified HR-related challenges. These pain points span a wide range of areas, such as employee engagement, performance management, talent acquisition, and more. Throughout the project, students engage in regular reflection activities and receive valuable feedback from both faculty and community partners. One exceptionally valuable element in this learning experience for students is the availability of low-cost SHRM and free resources (e.g., www.tlnt.com ; www.ere.net). HR program students subscribe to SHRM for an annual student membership of \$40, which serves as a textbook replacement for all program courses. Graded reading assignments as well as the necessity of integrating course and SHRM material into student consulting projects reinforces the learning outcomes students take away from their projects. Having access to these low-cost and free resources makes the HR program at UVU more accessible to students of low-income backgrounds and serves as a social equalizer across campus as well as it provides a competitive advantage to the HR program to attract and retain a diverse student population.

The culmination of the SUITS experience is a final presentation, where student(s) (teams) showcase their findings and recommendations to the client and their peers. This public-facing component not only reinforces students' learning but also demonstrates the tangible impact of their work. The importance of these presentations and the student consulting projects is demonstrated by who frequently attends these reports: client company CEOs, CHROs, HR Directors and their staff, plant managers, and other company representatives. In special cases, students have served as "class supervisors" to minimize the administrative burden of community partners and centralize all communication. In these cases, these class supervisors develop not only valuable leadership and professional communication skills,

but also a more personal relationship with HR representatives and company leaders and often present to them in a smaller circle. In other cases, students have presented to large groups of middle managers and front-line employees separately (e.g., large-scale employee engagement studies) in different formats (online, face-to-face). All these different presentation opportunities have tremendous impact for students and the longevity of their learning, networking, and application of HR material.

The UVU program

The following SUITS courses are taught at UVU and examples of student consulting projects are provided. Classes taught in the service-learning consulting-based approach are designed as SL:

- *Introduction to HR* – student groups work on large scale employee engagement studies, employee handbook creation/rewriting for larger organizations,
- *Employment Law* – employment law clinic (small student groups specialize on ONE specific HR law topic and provide supervised recommendations for small business owners with employment law questions)
- *Organizational Development* – small student groups explore planned organizational change through various models, diagnostic methods, and intervention strategies at individual, interpersonal, group, and system-wide levels
- *Training & Development* – small student groups develop training curricula for management training (time management, critical conversations, etc.) or frontline employees (safety training, communication training, etc.)
- *Total Compensation* – small student groups generate external and/or internal equity analyses for client companies
- *HR Information Systems* – individual students review client company's current HRIS usage and needs and generate recommendations which HRIS might suit their current and future needs best
- *HR Analytics* – individual students review (cleaned up) client data and generate customized reports based on client needs
- *Strategic Staffing & Performance Evaluation* - individual students review current staffing and performance evaluation practices and generate recommendations for improvement that need to make a bottom-line impact (e.g., turnover reduction)
- *International HR* - individual students review current practices of internationally operating companies and generate recommendations for improvement (e.g., use of expatriates, international transfers, etc.)
- *Strategic HRM* (capstone) – individual students receive a thorough HRCI exam preparation, complete the HRCI exam, and also listen to multiple high-level (CHRO, Director, etc.) guest speakers about their strategic approach to building organizational strength through HR.

These student consulting projects have generated many million dollars in HR savings for client companies, especially in turnover cost reductions, training cost reductions, and process optimizations, benefiting real-world applicants, employees, executives, and customers. The incremental evolution of consulting skills in students is a current research project on which we are working. The transformation of students from novices to skilled HR consultants at a junior level in the framework of an undergraduate curriculum, however, is astonishing and reminiscent of Mike Ross' development in "Suits" (Korsh & Smith, 2011). It is reflected not only in measurable skills but also the confidence of students in their business savvy and viable contributions made to real

organizations. While students often start apprehensive and intimidated by the idea of working with company leaders during the Introduction to HR class, by the time they reach the Strategic Staffing and Performance Evaluation or International HR classes students have reached a level of confidence, self-efficacy, and business readiness as consultants that is beyond their status as undergraduate students.

The Outcomes and Success Metrics:

The outcomes of this consulting-based SUITS program have been overwhelmingly positive, both for the students and the community partners involved.

Success Measurement Outcomes: At UVU, success is measured in student placement first and foremost. Success is staggering: 82% of the HR students are successful in earning a job in the field. This percentage is higher than any other undergraduate program at UVU and is solely to be ascribed to the dedication of its faculty to provide an impactful, community-based, and highly networked learning environment that gears students up for career placement and success. Furthermore, students are also exceptionally successful in SHRM Case Competitions, earning them a reputation of excellence. HRCI provides additional success metrics by supplying program-level, aggregate data about strength and weaknesses of the cohort taking the professional certification exam to earn an aPHR, showcasing areas of improvement the program must make each year.

Student Outcomes: In personal conversations with us as well as in their demeanor as emerging HR consultants, students have reported a significant increase in their confidence and competence in core HR domains, as well as a deeper sense of social responsibility and civic engagement. The hands-on, applied nature of the SL projects has allowed them to bridge the theory-practice gap, translating their classroom knowledge into real-world solutions. With multiple successful real-world SL projects under their belts, and shovel-ready skills, many students also successfully apply to top-notch

master's programs to further their career even faster.

Program Outcomes: The success of this program has not gone unnoticed. UVU's HR program has received recognition from the university administration and the local community for its positive impact, serving as a model for other departments to follow in integrating SL into their curricula. UVU's HR program stands as a testament to the transformative power of combining consulting-based SL with HR education, equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and social awareness needed to become the next generation of HR leaders.

Client Outcomes: Community partners have expressed immense satisfaction with the practical and impactful recommendations provided by the student teams. These solutions have led to tangible improvements within the organizations, further strengthening the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership. Students expand the bandwidth of HR departments via faculty-mentored project completion of important HR tasks, helping to pay back some tax dollars companies provide to higher education, and companies get a first-hand look at future HR talent to fill job vacancies and expand areas of expertise in their organizations.

Faculty Outcomes: Faculty, through industry-driven curricula, stay connected and up-to-date with job requirements of practitioners.

University Outcomes: The university provides meaningful services to the tax-paying business community, generating good will in the community resulting in donations from businesses and a connected, involved, and generous alumni network that can be transferred into scholarships for highly motivated students.

The Checklist

We provide a 10-point checklist with some obvious and not so obvious check marks for faculty members to go through sequentially to develop a SUITS HR program in higher education:

- ✓ Get the university and department administration behind building a SUITS HR program.
- ✓ Train faculty members in SUITS teaching methods (Consulting Competence House).
- ✓ Get faculty involved in local and regional professional HR organizations (SHRM).
- ✓ Build network of potential community partners (non-profit, for profit).
- ✓ Develop SUITS curriculum for a pilot class (Introduction to HR)
- ✓ Develop marketing materials for students to spread the word about the first SUITS class.
- ✓ Run pilot class with one community partner with an experienced HR pro as your mentor.
- ✓ Analyze strengths and weaknesses of pilot class with students and client organization.
- ✓ Fine tune your SUITS approach the following semester in another Introduction to HR class.
- ✓ Spread your SUITS methods to more HR classes until you have a full program.

Limitations

While service-learning with a consulting approach offers numerous benefits for HR education, several limitations and challenges should be acknowledged:

Resource Intensity: Implementing effective SL programs requires significant resources, including faculty time, administrative support, and community partnership development. Smaller institutions or programs with limited resources may struggle to establish and maintain the infrastructure needed for high-quality SL experiences.

Faculty Workload and Expertise: Faculty members must possess both subject matter expertise in HR and competency in SL pedagogy, while also managing the additional workload of developing community partnerships, mentoring students, and assessing complex projects. This

dual expertise requirement may limit the scalability of such programs.

Variability in Student Experiences: Despite structured approaches, student experiences can vary widely based on the nature of community partners, project scope, and team dynamics. This inconsistency may result in uneven learning outcomes across the student population.

Assessment Challenges: Measuring the impact of SL experiences with traditional academic metrics presents methodological challenges. Quantifying soft skill development, civic engagement growth, and long-term professional impact requires sophisticated assessment approaches that may be difficult to implement systemically.

Partner Availability and Alignment: Finding appropriate community partners with HR-related needs that align with course learning objectives can be challenging, particularly in smaller communities or specialized HR courses like HRIS or Analytics, where projects may require access to sensitive organizational data.

Sustainability Concerns: Maintaining long-term partnerships with community organizations requires ongoing relationship management. Staff turnover at partner organizations, changing organizational priorities, or economic fluctuations can disrupt established partnerships.

Equity Considerations: SL programs may unintentionally disadvantage students with significant work or family responsibilities who have limited flexibility for out-of-classroom activities or meetings with community partners. Additionally, transportation or technology access issues may create barriers for some students.

Legal and Ethical Constraints: HR consulting projects often involve confidential employee information, sensitive organizational data, and compliance-related matters. Navigating these constraints while providing meaningful learning experiences requires careful planning and supervision.

Generalizability of Case Studies: While the UVU case presented demonstrates impressive

outcomes, the unique institutional culture, regional business environment, and program structure may limit the direct transferability of this model to other institutional contexts.

Despite these limitations, we believe the benefits of integrating SL with a consulting approach in HR education outweigh the challenges. By acknowledging these constraints and developing strategies to address them, HR programs can create more effective and sustainable SL experiences that prepare students for the complex demands of contemporary HR practice.

Conclusion

Integrating a SUITS approach into HR education based on consulting skill development is a powerful and multi-faceted strategy for developing the next generation of HR professionals. This innovative pedagogical model offers a transformative learning experience that transcends the traditional classroom setting, yielding profound and far-reaching benefits.

At the core of this approach is the ability to bridge the theory-practice gap that often plagues higher education, including most traditional HR programs. By engaging students in real-world consulting projects with community partners, the service-learning experience allows them to apply their classroom knowledge to address genuine organizational challenges. This hands-on approach reinforces their understanding of HR concepts, hones their problem-solving skills, and prepares them for the realities of the workplace.

Equally important is the cultivation of essential professional competencies. The consulting aspect of service-learning programs equips students with a robust set of skills, including data analysis, strategic decision-making, client communication, and change management. These transferable abilities, combined with the people-oriented focus inherent in HR, empower students to navigate the complex and dynamic landscape of modern organizations.

Beyond the development of technical and professional proficiencies, service-learning with a consulting approach also fosters a deeper sense of civic engagement and social responsibility among students. By collaborating with community partners and addressing real-world challenges, students gain a heightened awareness of the social issues and inequities that organizations and communities face. This understanding not only shapes their perspective as future HR professionals but also inspires them to become agents of positive change, leveraging their skills and influence to create more inclusive, equitable, and socially conscious organizational cultures.

Ultimately, the integration of service-learning with a consulting approach in HR education is a strategic investment that yields dividends in the form of highly skilled, socially conscious, and purpose-driven HR leaders. As HR educators and professionals, we have a responsibility to prepare our students not only with technical HR knowledge, but also with durable transferable skills, social awareness, and commitment to positive change that will enable them to thrive in the evolving world of work. By embracing this transformative pedagogical model, we can empower our students to become catalysts for change, reshaping the HR landscape and contributing to the greater good of our communities.

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prestige or conformity, in a social dilemma game. Games, 12(4), Article 89.

Author Bios:

Dr. Bernd Kupka is an Assistant Professor in the Management Department at Radford University. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Hawaii at Hilo, a Master's from Radford University, and a PhD from the University of Otago. Dr. Kupka specializes in domestic and international human resource management, training and development, organizational behavior, and communication. His teaching approach emphasizes experiential education, engaging students as consultants for local organizations. His research primarily focuses on expatriation issues. Dr. Kupka's international educational background and practical teaching methods reflect his commitment to preparing students for real-world business challenges across global contexts.

Dr. Jonathan H. Westover is Associate Dean and Director of HR undergraduate and graduate academic programs at Western Governors University. Additionally, he is a doctoral faculty at the University of Arizona Global Campus and part of the Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies graduate program at Creighton University. Previously, he was Chair and Professor of Organizational Leadership and Change at UVU, where he built a state-of-the-art Human Resource Management program. He was also Academic Director of the Center for Social Impact, Director of Academic Service-Learning in the Innovation Academy, and Industry Impact Fellow in the Women in Business Impact Lab.

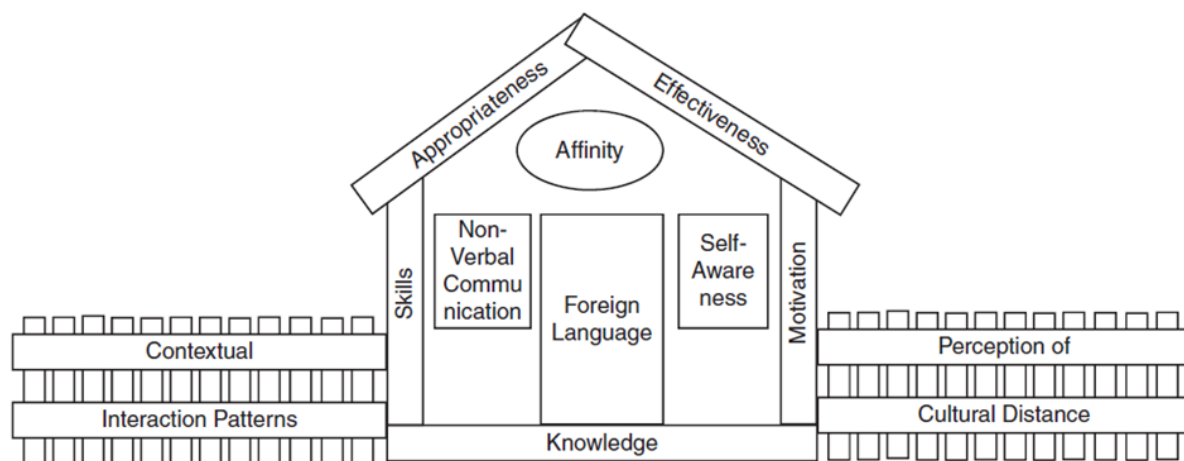


Figure 1: The Consulting Competence House (see Kupka, Westover, & Workman, 2016)

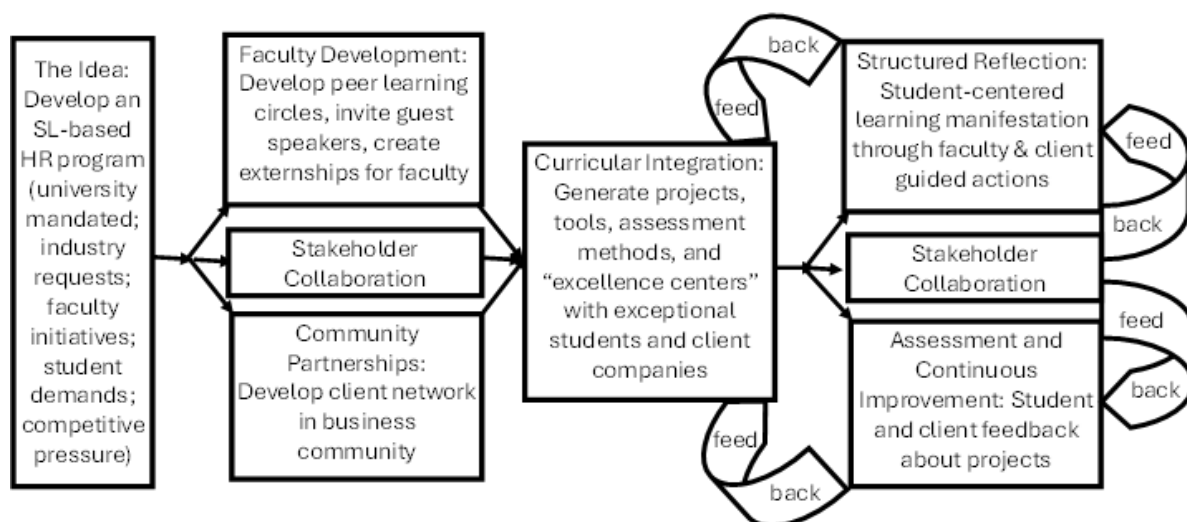


Figure 2: Program Building for HR Programs in Higher Education