



COMMENTARY

## “Helping us by helping you”: Pro bono consulting and graduate student training

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In our commentary, we will advocate for integrating pro bono consulting into I-O graduate studies' curricula. We consider pro bono consulting as a form of volunteering involving the free delivery of professional, I-O psychology services to stakeholders (e.g., Burbano et al., 2018). Although other volunteering activities (e.g., community service) have distinct developmental or altruistic benefits, we will argue here that pro bono consulting, if designed, implemented, and supported properly, provides valuable experiential learning opportunities for I-O graduate students. Tippins et al. (2023) provide case studies outlining the benefits of pro bono consulting not only for organizations receiving said services, but for practicing (nonstudent) I-O psychologists and for the I-O field as a whole. We will build on the authors' call by discussing how pro bono consulting at the graduate school level, with the help of educational institutions and SIOP, can further propel these positive outcomes. We will expand upon (a) applications of pro bono consulting in graduate training; (b) their benefits for training future I-O psychologists; (c) their extended benefits for organizations, universities, and communities; and (d) practical steps for bringing pro bono opportunities to life on campus.

### What is pro bono consulting at the graduate level?

Pro bono consulting can take on different forms in I-O graduate education. Some I-O graduate programs have in-house consultancies, in which students provide free or heavily discounted consulting services to organizations, especially locally. Program faculty typically oversee these consultancies, with some or all students working pro bono. For example, the student-led consulting group at our university uses a shadowing structure in which senior student consultants lead complex consulting projects for pay while supervising and mentoring newer, unpaid junior consultants who gain learning experience and professional development. In-house consultancies can be especially effective for establishing relationships between the program and the local community. At our university, surrounding public school systems have utilized our student consultants for needs assessments and conflict management workshops.

Beyond in-house consultancies, I-O programs can integrate pro bono consulting into their curricula such as through a practicum, in which students consult under faculty supervision and/or with established I-O practitioners. Several of the authors oversee an internship course at our university where students work under field supervisors with responsibilities relating to I-O psychology. Whereas some internships are paid, unpaid internships often have more autonomy in terms of hours and projects on which to work. The faculty teaching this internship course have also placed students as pro bono consultants within the university. Recently, our university's Residence Life department was struggling with resident assistant morale, performance, and

turnover post-COVID. Two I-O students worked with their professor and the assistant director of Residence Life to interview and survey RAs, their supervisors, residents, and the dean of Student Life, and conducted a benchmarking study of other universities to evaluate satisfaction and morale, identify sources of the issues, and propose solutions. Connections have also been made between the I-O Psychology faculty and the university's newly established Global Center for Human Trafficking, with plans for I-O master's students to conduct needs analyses determining survivors' employment and development needs and community resources.

Last, faculty can design courses to include consulting experiences, in which students learn and apply course concepts while working with clients who are identified by either the instructor or the students. For example, an author of this commentary taught a Performance Management course in which students conducted a needs analysis for an organization to which they had access and used the results of the analysis to design and propose a talent management system for one or more positions in the organization. One semester, the author was approached by a medical school about creating a talent management system for medical students completing initial rotations. After explaining the request to the class, one student volunteered to complete the system for her class project with the professor's oversight. The resident was appreciative and the following year indicated that the system was providing helpful feedback.

## **Benefits for students**

### ***Developing competencies***

SIOP suggests that all I-O master's and doctoral training programs provide education and opportunities for students to develop competencies that are hallmarks of our field (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2016). For instance, the SIOP training guidelines recommend that students develop competency in (a) ethical, legal, diversity, and international issues; (b) professional skills; and (c) research and statistical methods. Regarding competency in ethical, legal, diversity, and international issues, pro bono consulting under faculty guidance allows students to witness various ethical and legal nuances that often occur in I-O practice, such as balancing measurement validity with diversity considerations. Additionally, pro bono consulting can enable students to work with people from other countries and cultures to gain understanding of international issues and perspectives, especially when working with global not-for-profit organizations or organizations that serve those in need globally.

Furthermore, interacting with clients on real world problems enables students to develop their professional skills (e.g., presenting, communication, critical thinking) in an environment with higher stakes than the classroom prior to entering the workforce (e.g., Yorio & Ye, 2012). Based on research suggesting that increasing task significance (i.e., higher stakes) can increase employee engagement (Christian et al., 2011), the higher stakes in pro bono work (as compared to the classroom) can increase student involvement and subsequently enhance learning and development. Finally, classroom projects and project-based internships that involve solving the issues of smaller businesses or not-for-profit organizations often necessitate that students get creative, because funds and resources in such organizations tend to be limited, by applying their methods and statistical knowledge in new ways.

### ***Realistic job preview***

Graduate school is a pivotal time when students confront future-altering questions like, "is this job the right fit for me?" A common aid to answer this question has been the internship, an opportunity for students to take an active role in a work-based learning environment (Gillespie et al., 2020). Because not all students have the resources (e.g., time, family coverage) to take on an internship, comparable alternatives could include pro bono consulting opportunities through

one's graduate program and curricula. Gillespie *et al.* (2020) reviewed psychosocial factors as a predictor of college internship outcomes and found that by gaining exposure to work during their academic tenure, opportunities for self-exploration and identification increased, helping students visualize their place in the workforce. Pro bono consulting can thus be an important component for students to understand if consulting fits their interests.

### **Knowledge transfer**

Integral to any work-based experience is the ability to utilize and transfer knowledge from the classroom to the task at hand. In a study by Garcia-Aracil *et al.* (2021), over 600 master's students in their graduating year reported their preparedness for entering the workforce postgraduation, citing that engaging in systematic and practical competencies in the classroom coupled with work-based opportunities and skills made them feel more confident in their transition. Through participating in pro bono consulting, students gain opportunities to apply typically abstract course concepts in a high-fidelity environment while having professors as a resource to answer questions and provide guidance when faced with new or challenging tasks.

### **Benefits for organizations**

We believe the clearest foreseeable organizational benefit from graduate student-level pro bono consulting is enhanced access to I-O services. As many I-O psychologists anecdotally are aware, I-O psychology is a "hidden gem"; some organizational leaders are unaware of I-O psychology as a field and the value that can be gained from I-O services. Even when leaders know of I-O psychology, affordability creates an additional barrier. Some organizations, such as nonprofits, religious organizations, local and family-owned businesses, and academic departments (as illustrated above), may not have the finances to afford an internal, full-time I-O psychologist or to pay for external consulting services from established firms.

Pro bono consulting opportunities for graduate students serve as a potential way for these underserved organizations to gain access to I-O services. For example, one author of this paper conducted pro bono work to assist a family-owned organization in evaluating the effectiveness of their mentor-based Pre-Cana (*i.e.*, marriage preparation) program marketed to parishes. For a few hours per week, two PhD students (one of them also an author on this paper) volunteered to assist in creating a "train-the-trainer" program aimed at teaching parish administrators how to interview mentors and mentees who completed the program. Through engagements such as these, ancillary benefits also exist for the discipline by (a) increasing awareness of I-O psychology among businesses and (b) developing opportunities for I-O faculty and students to access data from employee populations that have received less research attention.

### **Benefits for universities and I-O programs**

When facilitated by a program or instructor, pro bono student consulting can benefit programs and universities alike. First, when consulting services are delivered effectively, such efforts could spread awareness and enhance the reputation of the program and university. Doing so may also create social exchange opportunities between universities and organizations (local and otherwise) through strategic partnerships and donations. Second, I-O programs can create structure and boundaries for students, enabling them to gain applied experience while making progress toward graduation. Such a structure may appeal to prospective students who want to gain applied experience during their graduate studies and also helps retain enrolled students who otherwise may become tempted to consult full-time without completing their degree. Thus, pro bono consulting opportunities may help bolster important metrics that universities use to evaluate I-O programs, such as time to degree, student retention, and job placement rates. Last, by creating

opportunities for students (and by extension, faculty) to partner with organizations, pro bono consulting may open doors to new sources of organizational data for research.

### Benefits for communities

Last, we consider the benefits of pro bono student consulting for local communities and broader society. As psychologists, I-Os have an ethical and moral obligation to benefit people and society through our work (Lefkowitz, 2011). Because pro bono student consulting may be especially relevant to local and nonprofit organizations that otherwise might not afford these services, I-O psychology students and programs may indirectly generate benefits for local communities and underprivileged populations, respectively, by strengthening these organizations. For example, by applying I-O principles to enhance local organizations, I-O students may indirectly (a) facilitate greater business and resources coming into the community and (b) potentially create more job opportunities for local residents as these organizations develop. Such consulting engagements may also open the door for new partnerships between local and nonprofit organizations (including the communities they serve) and other departments or programs within the university (i.e., town-gown relationships, Bruning et al., 2006). Many colleges and universities have long and often complicated histories with their local communities and are now recognizing the benefits of better integrating into their communities to help improve those relationships (Bruning et al., 2006). Pro bono consulting represents one opportunity to develop and enhance that relationship between “town and gown.” Although students gain experiences noted earlier, pro bono consulting helps universities provide expertise to local communities and help students become contributing members to these communities.

### Conclusion: the road ahead

Through our commentary, we hope to have outlined a convincing case for pro bono consulting to be more heavily integrated into graduate student education, given the potential benefits it provides for the stakeholders discussed above. We conclude our commentary with what we believe can be done by various stakeholders to help facilitate this integration. We present our full set of recommendations in Table 1, whereas here we will emphasize what we believe is the most critical step before any such integration: conducting a needs analysis.

Programs should engage with their students, faculty, and administrators to determine what value student pro bono consulting would contribute at various levels. Example questions to answer in such a needs analysis include: “Are students interested in pro bono consulting, and why?” “What resources and constraints exist (e.g., availability, organizational connections, administrative support, faculty competencies), and could they impact how pro bono consulting gets integrated into our program?” “How does pro bono consulting connect to our program’s learning goals, to the types of careers our students tend to seek, to our university’s mission, etc.?” This needs analysis may also serve as a pilot consulting opportunity for students and may provide insights into program-level consulting capabilities. For example, during the process, program leaders might note any stumbling blocks such as administrative barriers or tasks that students struggled to execute, which may reflect important areas to remedy before engaging with actual clients. The results of such a needs analysis may also determine whether programs should focus on integrating more cost-effective consulting opportunities (e.g., class-specific projects, hypothetical consulting scenarios) versus more resource-intensive initiatives (e.g., in-house consultancies). Regardless of the approach taken, we hope these hands-on experiences will contribute to an increasingly bright future for I-O psychology, organizations, and society.

**Table 1.** Recommended Action Steps: Facilitating Pro Bono Consulting in I-O Graduate Education

Source	Recommendations
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in their own pro bono consulting and include students</li> <li>• Develop an in-house consultancy that includes pro bono consulting projects</li> <li>• Build pro bono consulting into courses, such as by creating applied projects that clearly tie into learning objectives</li> <li>• Include pro bono consulting opportunities in capstone internship courses</li> </ul>
Programs and universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop centers to help connect and maintain relationships between programs/faculty/ students and local organizations</li> <li>• Promote pro bono consulting services offered by faculty and students</li> </ul>
SIOP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create awareness of pro bono consulting through workshops for students, faculty, and program directors</li> <li>• Create guidelines for designing student pro bono consulting opportunities</li> <li>• Provide support and training to programs or faculty who want to engage in pro bono consulting with students or develop program consultancies</li> </ul>
Graduate students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly voice an interest in pro bono consulting to faculty so that faculty know who to approach when these opportunities emerge</li> <li>• Strategically advocate pro bono consulting to faculty, such as by conducting a program-level needs analysis</li> </ul>

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