

BUSINESS ON THE FRONTLINES AT UCU: SERVICE-LEARNING AS AN INSTRUMENT OF TERRITORIAL RECOVERY IN WARTIME UKRAINE

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1. Context and problem framing

Can service-learning function as an instrument of territorial recovery in wartime Ukraine, and not only as an instrument of student civic formation? This paper examines one attempt to find out, and identifies the design conditions under which it worked.

Ukraine's recovery happens at the level of territorial communities. National reconstruction frameworks and international financing matter, but the unit of lived recovery is the community (*Hromada*): a specific town or group of villages, its organisations, its municipal authorities, its returning residents. Each faces a combinatorial problem – aging infrastructure, capital constraints, demographic loss, disrupted markets, unresolved heritage assets, and in many cases proximity to active conflict. The applied managerial expertise needed to address this problem is scarce, unevenly distributed, and rarely available to second-tier communities on terms they can afford. This is where higher education institutions (HEIs) have an under-exploited role.

Service-learning (SL) is one of the pedagogical bridges between HEIs and communities (Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 2015). At Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU), the number of credit-bearing SL courses grew from 13 in 2021 to 44 in 2025. But most Ukrainian SL practice – like most international SL practice – sits at the undergraduate level: modest intensity (1–3 ECTS), short community engagements, and deliverables that are primarily pedagogical rather than operational. This is appropriate for the civic formation of young students. It leaves the recovery question open.

Block and Bartkus (2019) provide the cleanest frame for asking it. In their study of thirty international SL projects across eight years of *Business on the Frontlines* at the University of Notre Dame, they distinguish between indirect and direct value for partner organisations: most SL projects generate some indirect value (exposure, relationships, fresh perspectives), but direct value – outputs the partner actually uses – is rarer, and depends on three design conditions they call partner readiness, project design, and project execution.

This paper applies that frame to the autumn 2025 delivery of *Business on the Frontlines* (BOTFL) as a 9-ECTS elective in UCU Business School's Key Executive MBA programme, co-delivered with the course's originators, with three interlinked partners in the Novyi Rozdil (Rozdil) community in the Lviv region. The paper is a practitioner reflection from inside the course team. Its purpose is descriptive and design-oriented rather than theoretical: to report what BOTFL produced for the community, to identify the design choices that produced those effects, and to make those choices explicit enough that other Ukrainian HEIs and their EU partners can reproduce them deliberately rather than hope for them. The setting is unusual on three dimensions Block and Bartkus's sample did not foreground in combination – active wartime, an executive cohort, and students who are themselves embedded in the recovery economy rather than visiting it from outside – and these dimensions shape the design choices we report.

2. Approach and methodology

This is a reflective single-case study from the vantage point of the course team. The first author was the instructor of record for BOTFL 2025; the second author, as CEO of UCU Business School, holds institutional responsibility for the course's integration into the School's programme portfolio and for the partnership architecture with the Business on the Frontlines Initiative. Our access to evidence is therefore privileged and partial, and we declare that positionality rather than conceal it.

The evidence base comprises: the course syllabus and its mapping to UCU Business School programme learning outcomes; final deliverables produced by the three student teams (strategic memoranda, multi-scenario financial models with CAPEX

projections, an export-market assessment, an ESG report, and an industrial-park repositioning analysis); memoranda of understanding (MoU) signed between each team and its partner; partner evaluations of student deliverables; two individual reflection essays per student (pre- and post-immersion); daily team debrief logs from the immersion week of 26 October – 1 November 2025; final grades including a partner-assigned component; and the course team’s observations across the September–December 2025 cycle.

We analyse what BOTFL produced for the Novyi Rozdil community and what explains it, treating student learning as an associated outcome rather than the primary object. The limits are real. Single-case designs do not generalise. Instructor-authored reflection is not a substitute for independent partner evaluation. Six months after completion is too short to observe whether partner adoption of student recommendations translates into community-level outcomes. Where evidence rests on partner self-report rather than independent verification, we mark the claim as such. We flag claims that stretch beyond the evidence.

The case sits at the intersection of three literatures that rarely speak to each other: SL pedagogy (Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 2015; Block & Bartkus, 2019), universities in post-conflict reconstruction (Milton & Barakat, 2016; Milton, 2019), and entrepreneurship in necessity contexts (Bacq et al., 2022; Boychuk et al., 2021). We do not claim to bridge them. We draw on them selectively to interpret what we observed and to position the design choices we report. In particular, Milton and Barakat’s account of HEIs that underperform their potential contribution to reconstruction by defaulting to narrowly-defined teaching missions helps explain why intensive applied-engagement formats are rare and why the design choices BOTFL required were non-trivial for the institution to make. We are not arguing that SL is sufficient for territorial recovery, only that it can be a non-trivial component of the institutional architecture recovery requires.

3. Case description – BOTFL’s architecture for recovery

BOTFL originated at the University of Notre Dame in 2008 under Dr Viva Bartkus. By 2024, the course had delivered more than ninety projects across thirty countries, typically in post-conflict or

deep-poverty contexts (Block & Bartkus, 2019; Sweeney, 2024). The Ukrainian adaptation was developed jointly with UCU Business School and delivered over a full semester, with Bartkus and her colleagues Kelly Strait and Joe Sweeney travelling to Lviv to co-lead all projects in Novyi Rozdil and transfer the course methodology.

The cohort was thirteen Key Executive MBA students, most of them holding senior positions in Ukrainian companies. Students were organised into three teams, each matched to one project in the Novyi Rozdil community.

The **Rozdil Palace Revitalisation** team worked with EFI Group and Heritage.UA on a sustainable business model for converting an eighteenth-century palace – one of Ukraine’s most significant heritage sites – into a self-sustaining cultural and tourism anchor. The team delivered refined CAPEX estimates, three-scenario financial models, and an expert network map.

The **Novyi Rozdil Industrial Park** team worked with the Novyi Rozdil City Council and the park’s management consortium on repositioning a post-industrial site stagnant for nearly a decade. The team reframed the park from land asset to infrastructure platform, proposed an eco-specialisation and circular-economy positioning consistent with regional logistics and energy endowments, and delivered recommendations on youth retention and vocational-curriculum alignment.

The **Zakhid Solod (Rozdil Brewery)** team worked with a private producer – supplier of roughly sixty per cent of Ukraine’s domestic barley malt – on an export strategy for artisanal malts to North American and European buyers, an organisational restructuring plan, an ESG report, and a digital communications strategy.

Two design features distinguish BOTFL from many other SL formats. First, the partnership instruments were formalised: each team signed an MOU specifying scope, deliverables, and timelines, and partners retained the right to evaluate the thirty-mark partner-assigned component of the final grade. Second, the course was deliberately intensive in both credit weight (9 ECTS) and calendar commitment, including a week of full-time community presence.

The course was structured in four phases, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. BOTFL 2025 course architecture

Phase	Timing	Activity
Retreat	September 2025	Two-day residential. Conceptual grounding; team formation.
Online deep-dive	10 weeks (Sept–Oct)	Structured readings on the role of business in post-conflict and deep-poverty contexts; weekly partner calls; team working sessions.
Immersion	26 Oct – 1 Nov 2025	All three teams simultaneously in Rozdil. Overlapping stakeholder interviews; joint evening debriefs; scheduled encounters with municipal, religious, and community leaders.
Delivery and reflection	Nov–Dec 2025	Final deliverables; partner presentations; individual pre- and post-immersion reflection essays; partner-assigned grade component.

4. Analysis – three mechanisms of direct partner value

Block and Bartkus (2019) found that direct value – outputs the partner uses – is comparatively rare in SL, and that when it occurs it depends on partner readiness, project design, and project execution. They classify a wider set of relational and perspective-shifting outcomes as indirect value. BOTFL 2025 produced direct value on all three Rozdil projects and produced indirect value of the kind their framework anticipates. We organise our reflection around three mechanisms by which the course produced value for the community. The mechanisms are not parallel and we should say so plainly: they operate at different levels of analysis and on different timescales. Mechanism 1 is an organisation-level direct-value output, observable immediately in partner deliverables. Mechanism 2 is a network-level relational outcome – of the kind Block and Bartkus would categorise as indirect value, but operating across the community network of HEI, municipal authorities,

multiple firms, and civil society rather than at any single partner organisation. Mechanism 3 is an individual-level reframing in the executive student's decision frame, whose effects are slower and harder to attribute. We name them together because each reaches partner needs the others cannot.

4.1 Consulting-grade deliverables absorbed into partner strategy

Each team delivered artefacts of a quality and specificity the partner could use. Partner evaluations submitted as part of the thirty-mark grading component report the following uses. The Palace team's multi-scenario financial model and refined CAPEX structure are being used by EFI Group as inputs into ongoing capital allocation decisions for the site. The Industrial Park team's repositioning analysis has been integrated by the city council into its regional development framing in subsequent stakeholder communications. The Zakhid Solod team's export strategy, organisational restructuring plan, and ESG report are being used by the company in preparing its 2026 brewing expansion and its initial approaches to international buyers. These uses rest on partner self-report and would benefit from independent longitudinal verification, which we discuss in §5.

This is not student project work "shared with partners" in the soft sense the SL literature sometimes describes (Kolenko et al., 1996; Papamarcos, 2005, as critiqued by Block & Bartkus, 2019). It is the absorption of specific analytical instruments into partner decision-making. The mechanism that made absorption possible is the combination of student capability – mid-career executives applying skills they already use professionally – with a partnership structure that obliged partners to treat deliverables as operational rather than pedagogical. The MOU did this explicitly; the thirty-mark partner-evaluated grading component reinforced it.

This mechanism generalises poorly to undergraduate SL. It depends on a student cohort with pre-existing professional capability, on partner organisations sophisticated enough to specify operationally useful scopes of work, and on a calendar that permits genuine analytical depth. It generalises well to other executive and graduate professional education programmes where SL is currently rare.

4.2 Trust infrastructure as a durable community asset

The second mechanism is less visible in deliverables and more visible in relationships. Over seven days of simultaneous multi-team presence in Rozdil – with structured interactions that included the mayor of Novyi Rozdil, management of three distinct organisations, Greek Catholic clergy, and community members associated with a local orphanage – the immersion week produced a web of relationships between UCU, municipal authorities, local organisations, and Heritage.UA that did not exist before the course and that has outlasted it.

This relational infrastructure is itself a recovery asset. It lowers the cost of subsequent HEI–community collaboration; it gives the community a credible channel to UCU’s wider expertise beyond BOTFL; it makes future SL projects in Rozdil easier to scope, match, and deliver. In the Ukrainian recovery context – where the coordination problem between HEIs and territorial communities is often more binding than the expertise constraint itself – this infrastructure may be more valuable than any single deliverable. Block and Bartkus would categorise relational outcomes of this kind as indirect partner value. The observation we want to flag for practitioners is one of scale rather than category: when a course immerses several teams simultaneously across a connected set of partners in one community, the resulting relational outcome is not a bilateral HEI–partner tie but a multi-node network across the community, and its practical consequences for future collaboration are correspondingly different.

The same logic appears in impact-investing work on Ukrainian post-industrial territories, where the relational and institutional scaffolding around a deal often matters more than the capital (Boychuk et al., 2021). It also appears in recent work on social intermediaries in necessity contexts, where the intermediary’s role is less to deliver any single intervention than to knit together communities that lack pre-existing bonds (Bacq et al., 2022). BOTFL in Rozdil functions as exactly that kind of intermediary. Durable recovery depends on the infrastructure that makes the next transaction possible, not only on the first.

4.3 Civic formation of executive decision-makers

The third mechanism is distinctive to BOTFL's cohort composition. Standard SL theory emphasises the civic formation of students as future citizens (Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 2015). BOTFL students were already mid-career executives making capital, hiring, and strategic decisions in their companies. Reshaping the moral imagination of a twenty-year-old is pedagogically valuable, but the multiplier is diffuse and long-delayed. Reshaping the moral imagination of a general manager, founder, or finance director is at least a candidate pathway to faster, more concentrated effects – though the hypothesis that such reshaping translates into observable downstream decisions is one our design enables but does not yet test.

The reflection structure – two individual essays framed around pre- and post-immersion stances, daily team reflection debriefs on positionality and ethical dilemmas, and explicit engagement with themes of the dignity of work and service as privilege – was designed to make this reframing explicit and discussable. The final reflection essays show evidence of reframing in a majority of the cohort, with particular density around the visit to the local orphanage, encounters with clergy, and interactions with workers at the industrial park and the brewery. Several rounds of verbal reflection across the cohort and staff supplemented the written essays.

The mechanism is consistent with frames in the social-enterprise literature that treat identity and meaning-making as constitutive of the enterprise form rather than decorative (Murphy et al., 2018; Murphy, Kornetsky, & Nixon, 2022). Applied to executive SL, the practical implication is that the pedagogical intervention and the territorial-recovery intervention are not separable: reshaping executive cognition is plausibly one of the ways the course contributes to recovery, because executive cognition is an input into recovery. We treat that as a hypothesis worth designing future evaluation around, not as a finding.

5. Implications and open questions

For Ukrainian HEIs, the first implication is that SL's community-recovery value is not uniform across formats. Intensive executive SL, of the kind BOTFL represents, produces a distinct category

of outputs – consulting-grade deliverables, durable trust infrastructure, reshaped executive cognition – that shorter formats are unlikely to replicate. This argues for a portfolio view of SL within an institution’s offer rather than a single dominant format. UCU’s trajectory from thirteen to forty-four SL courses usefully illustrates the point: the question now is not only how many SL courses the institution runs but which categories of community value they collectively cover.

For EU partners supporting Ukraine’s recovery through higher education – the ServU consortium being the immediate case – the implication is that pedagogical transfer of proven SL formats from European and North American institutions is feasible and can be high-value, provided the transfer is genuinely co-delivered rather than templated. The BOTFL Initiative representatives’ direct presence at weekly synchronisation and on the ground in Rozdil was not symbolic. They were the channel through which two decades of BOTFL practice entered UCU’s operational capability.

Maintaining intensive-format SL requires institutional support that lighter formats do not. The conditions are specific and not prohibitively expensive, but their absence is what typically causes executive SL pilots to fail to institutionalise: partner-facing MOU templates with operational scopes; grading structures that formally include partner evaluation; faculty workloads that accommodate a week of full-time community presence; and a working relationship with employers of executive students who must release them for that week. ServU sustainability planning should treat these as line items, not goodwill.

Three open questions remain, and we lead with the most consequential.

5.1 Scalability and funding

BOTFL 2025 ran with one instructor, thirteen students, three teams, and one community. A second cohort is planned to run across two different communities, which requires a second instructor, two big partnership negotiations, and two immersion logistics packages. The binding constraint is funding rather than methodology: faculty time, immersion logistics, and the cost of bringing co-teaching partners are real line items that should somehow be covered. Sustainability conversations within ServU and with prospective

philanthropic and corporate partners should treat this as the practical bottleneck. Without a financing model, the format is replicable in principle and unaffordable in practice.

5.2 Partner-side evaluation over time

We have treated partner absorption of deliverables as evidence of direct value, but we have not presented a systematic longitudinal evaluation methodology. Future iterations should build one, probably at eighteen- and thirty-six-month post-completion intervals, to test whether absorption translates into decisions and decisions into community-level outcomes. Block and Bartkus's (2019) framework offers a starting point; a wartime adaptation will need to account for partner organisations whose strategic decisions are themselves disrupted by the war, and for an evaluation timeline that may need to be longer than usual because effects are interrupted rather than absent.

5.3 Recovery-oriented and civic-participation-oriented SL within one portfolio

Recovery-oriented SL and conventional civic-participation-oriented SL are not the same intervention. They should not be evaluated against the same criteria, and the institutional support structures they need are not identical. Evaluation documents that were designed for the conventional cases should be adapted to assess intensive recovery-oriented formats fairly. That could be a near-term task for the institutions and ServU partners facing the same portfolio question.

6. Conclusion

Service-learning can function as an instrument of territorial recovery in wartime Ukraine, but only under specific conditions. BOTFL 2025 produced direct partner value through three distinguishable mechanisms: organisation-level deliverables absorbed by partners into strategic decisions; a community-level relational network across HEI, municipal authorities, local organisations, and civil society that outlasts the course and lowers the cost of the next collaboration; and individual-level reframing in executive decision-makers whose downstream effects are plausible

but not yet measured. None of these is automatic. Each rests on design choices – intensity, formalised partnership, executive cohort composition, genuine pedagogical co-delivery with the course's foreign originators, and a financing model that treats faculty and immersion costs as real – that Ukrainian HEIs and their EU partners can reproduce, but only deliberately. The ServU consortium's legacy will depend in part on how well these conditions are written into the sustainable SL infrastructure Ukrainian HEIs carry forward.

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