
What is Service-Learning?

Service-learning is a pedagogy that links service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service learning originated from John Dewey's belief that the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning. Service-learning is an approach to experiential learning, whereby students learn and develop through active participation and engage in activities that address human and community needs together. In this approach to service-learning, not only is the student a learner, but faculty, community organization staff and community residents are seen as learners as well. [National Society for Experiential Education]

What distinguishes service-learning from other volunteer experiences is the intentional integration of service and learning and the reciprocal nature of both the service and the learning among all parties in the relationship – students, faculty, and community partners. Service-learning helps foster civic responsibility, enhances the academic curriculum by connecting academic theory with experience; and includes structured reflection [adapted from the Corporation for National Service RFP].

Service-learning is different from:

Volunteerism ...where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient.

Community Service...where the primary focus [is] on the service being provided as well as the benefits the service activities have on the recipients. The students receive some benefits by learning more about how their service makes a difference.

Internships...[that] engage students in service activities primarily for the purpose of providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study.

Field Education...[that] provide students with co-curricular service opportunities that are related, but not fully integrated, with their formal academic studies. Students perform the service as a part of a program that is designed primarily to enhance students' understanding of a field of study, while also providing substantial emphasis on the service being provided.

From: Andrew Furco. 1996. "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education." Expanding Boundaries: Service and Learning. Corporation for National Service.

Potential Benefits of Academic Service-Learning Partnerships

Students	Faculty	Community
Develops skills and helps apply course material to new situations	Redefines role of teacher from giver of knowledge to facilitator of knowledge	Contributes to community development and renewal
Develops critical thinking skills	Teaching becomes more process oriented due to interaction with students	Extends community's human resources to address unmet needs
Engages all learners, not just more vocal or assertive		Provides community organizations with an inside look at university
Improves self-confidence	Impacts how you teach, what you teach, and where you teach	Gets things done!
Promotes a sense of belonging to a community and usefulness to society	Influences curriculum offerings	Demonstrates that students are learning skills of use to society
Provides work experience and networking opportunities	Becomes an excellent recruitment and retention strategy of courses and departments because students are engaged	Formalizes connections with university
Increases civic and active citizenship skills	Provides for connections between research and teaching	Develops future community leaders
	Promotes democratic citizenship and leadership skill development	

Potential Barriers to Community-University Partnerships for Service-Learning

Students	Faculty	Community
Lack of time and money given demands of school, necessity of work, and families	Research is viewed as the most important aspect of the mission, leaving little time to coordinate work of students with community	Lack of time for training and supervision for the contribution given by the students to the organization
Fear of unfamiliar neighborhoods and working with people you've never had experience interacting with	Fear of unknown and letting go of control of the classroom when the impact of service-learning is not easy to quantify in short term	Fear of having people come in for only a short time and leave causing more damage
Lack of transportation to get to organizations	Requires rethinking and changes to curriculum	Difficulty recruiting students to work with organization due to location
Lack of support given by instructor	Lack of institutional and departmental support given to faculty (tenure decisions)	Seeing undesired changes in community or no changes
Fear of asking for help because it requires willingness to admit vulnerability	Having to answer a lot of questions from students and having more questions themselves	Fear of exploitation due to history of being "used" by academic institutions
Treating service-learning as a service-only experience not a reciprocal learning experience	Viewing service-learning as soft, non-rigorous, non-academic learning or as an add-on, not an integral aspect of the course	Difficulty finding work to be done by students that meets students/faculty goals and community goals

Information compiled by the Career and Community Learning Center, University of Minnesota, 2001