

Integrating Service with Academic Study: The Necessary First Steps

Step One: Resolving Doubts

- Is service-learning about what we teach or is it about how we teach it?
- When we emphasize the importance of reflection, are we speaking of the content of the discussion or the methods used during a session?
- How can I make the service-learning component an integral part of the course and not just another add-on assignment?

Step Two: Start with the Basics- who, what, when, where, why, and how

- Who are we teaching?
- What content and information will we be teaching them?
- When is the most appropriate time to teach this in the context of their education?
- In what setting can students best learn this course material?
- Why is it important to teach this content and to teach them in this manner?
- And how can we be most successful in teaching this information?

Step Three: Identifying Course Competencies

- Review the existing competencies and learning expectations (objectives) in the course. Look at areas where your current design and methods may not be the best fit for today's college students. Students want to be able to see a visible connection between what they are learning and how that affects their daily lives.
- Most times, the course objectives are perfectly relevant, but the means by which we are "teaching" and the student is "learning" fails in terms of "connectivity."

Step Four: Decide which Objectives are Best Suited to Service-Learning

- Competencies and objectives best learned via active learning are better suited than those that remain in theoretical or intellectual mode. Demonstration of rote memorization of content is less suited to service-learning than demonstration of an applied comprehension of the concept.
- Each instructor must determine the fit of service-learning to the particular course. The degree of importance of the course objective you choose may dictate the amount of service time required of the student. (But keep in mind that it is the LEARNING that matters, not the time.)

Making It Happen

Incorporating service-learning into a course requires thoughtful pre-planning and follow-up. Remember that the service activity is not an additional component, but another way to teach course concepts. Successful learning and effective community contributions depend upon a well-integrated package of syllabus, orientation, reflection, and assessment.

Negotiating Projects

- Articulate, in writing, the objective(s) of service-learning in your course.
 - What do you want students to gain through the experience?
 - Communicate your objectives(s) to the Service-Learning Center staff
- Identify community needs that may be appropriate for your objectives.
 - Ask the Service-Learning Staff to draft a list of possibilities or identify community needs via your own professional contacts.
- Contact potential community partners
 - Describe what you and your students have to offer via your course objectives, timeline, and limitations.
 - Gather information concerning the following: agency need; contact person, location, and number of students they can accommodate, orientation and training requirements, and hours of operation or need. If using the individual placement design, create a table with information on the sites that are a fit. This will serve as a site selection menu for students.

Developing the Syllabus

- Identify the service activity and objective(s) of the service in the syllabus.
- Link the service to course content.
 - Writing assignments, discussion topics, readings, presentations, and other activities listed in the syllabus.
- Clearly explain the incentive(s) for successful completion of the experience.
 - Provide a clear link between course content, the service activity and student success in the course.
- Describe how students will be assessed on the experience.
 - Clarify that the grade is for the learning that they demonstrate through papers, discussions, presentations, etc. - not for the service hours alone.

Orientation/Training

- Talk about the service experience on the first day of the course.
 - Touch on each of the topics listed under “developing the syllabus.”
 - Service-learning program staff may be available for class presentations.

- Consider inviting agency or community representatives to visit the class.
 - Host a panel presentation if you have multiple partners.
- Address student concerns, fears, and expectations regarding the service experience.
- Prepare students with the appropriate skills and brief them on their responsibilities regarding communication, follow-through, and professionalism.
- Have students complete a service-learning placement form with their community supervisor and submit a copy to you.

Contracting/Supervision

- Provide a timeline.
 - Students need benchmarks for contacting the agency, meeting with supervisors, signing contracts, and beginning and completing the service to avoid the inevitable temptation to procrastinate.
- Have a backup plan for students with special needs.
 - Consider providing an alternative (of equal demand) for those students who are legitimately unable to participate in the service.
- Contact the community partners (or ask the Service-Learning Center to do so) at least once mid-semester to seek feedback and, if possible, visit the service site(s) to gain first-hand exposure to the experience.

Reflection

- Implement reflective assignments and activities throughout the semester (before, during, and after the service experience).
- Discuss the service in class even if you are using an optional placement model.
 - Students who choose not to participate in the experience will still gain insights and knowledge from the comments of students who do participate.

Assessment/Evaluation

- Use reflection assignments to assess student learning and evaluate performance.
 - Evaluate analytical skills, communication skills, critical thinking and judgment from student's reflection papers and presentations.
 - Create individual or group assignments that require students to integrate the course content and the service experience.
- Though incentive points may be provided for successfully completing the service contract and obtaining a supervisor evaluation, the grade should be based upon rigorous assessment of student learning and skill application.
- Ask students to evaluate the experience and its purpose in the course.
 - Use the evaluations to plan and refine your next service-learning course.