Service-Learning 101—The Basics

Faculty Guide Series
ASU Service-Learning & Community-Based Research
University College | Appalachian State University
“Service-learning holds up a mirror for us to see ourselves, a microscope for us to examine our society, and binoculars for us to see what lies ahead.”

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**Definitions of Service-Learning**

There are a myriad of definitions for service utilized as part of an academic course or curriculum. Below are some that are used across the nation:

“Service-learning means a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience.” American Association for Higher Education (AAHE): Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines (adapted from the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993)

“Service-learning seeks to engage individuals in activities that combine both community service and academic learning. Because service-learning programs are typically rooted in formal courses (core academic, elective, or vocational), the service activities are usually based on particular curricular concepts that are being taught.” Andrew Furco, “Is Service-Learning Really Better than Community Service?” in Furco, Andrew and Shelley H. Billig, eds. Service-Learning: The Essence of the Pedagogy. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing Inc. 2002. p. 25

“Service-learning is a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community.” Campus Compact National Center for Community College

“Service-learning is a process through which students are involved in community work that contributes significantly: 1) to positive change in individuals, organizations, neighborhoods, and/or larger systems in a community; and 2) to students’ academic understanding, civic development, personal or career growth, and/or understanding of larger social issues. This process always includes an intentional and structured educational/developmental component for students, and may be employed in curricular or co-curricular settings. Even with an expanded vision for the field, service-learning will undoubtedly continue to play a critical role in campus-community collaboration.” From Charity to Change, by Minnesota Campus Compact

“Service-learning is a credit-bearing, educational, experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher, A Service Learning Curriculum for Faculty. The Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning, Fall 1995, pp.112-122
Distinctions Between Community Service, Internships, Volunteerism, Field Education, & Service-Learning

Community Service

➢ Does not typically include an academic component.
➢ Planning is often the responsibility of those providing the service.
➢ Often viewed more like a program or a project than a philosophy, pedagogy, or epistemology.
➢ Does not usually carry academic credit.
➢ While “student learning” is likely to take place, it is not an intentional or primary impetus for the program.
➢ Not usually any analysis of lessons learned or of deeper causation within social/institutional structures.
➢ Usually no mediation and reflection through which to increase understanding.

Internships

➢ Even if student is performing service, student engages in internship primarily for his/her benefit and primarily for learning rather than service.
➢ Internships often performed in for-profit environments and not necessarily for programs that benefit or serve community.

➢ Not usually an emphasis on social justice.
➢ Emphasis is on learning skills to benefit student in future employment

Volunteerism

➢ Focus on service recipient rather than student.
➢ Often focus on charity rather than social justice.
➢ Any learning outcomes, while beneficial, are unintentional.
➢ Any other benefits to student are unintentional.
➢ No bridge between service and classroom.

Field Experience

➢ Usually more long-term commitments which limit ability to continually and consciously reflect.
➢ Benefits both service recipient and student but focus is primarily on student’s learning and overall benefit.

Service-Learning

➢ Integrates academic study with community service in a way that makes “learning” more intentional (i.e., through reflective writing, group discussions, and other activities).
➢ Incorporates the concept of “mutuality” (i.e., several parties are included in the planning of the program, such as faculty, students, and those being “served”).
➢ Fosters participant learning about the larger social issues that are driving the need for service.
➢ Frames “service” in terms of social justice instead of in terms of charity.
➢ Emphasizes the importance of reciprocity (i.e., the exchange of both giving and receiving and the responsibility for both teaching and learning by those “serving” and those “being served”).

➢ Establishes a rhythm of reflection-action-reflection.

➢ Uses service as a “text” and often rewards academic credit to students who use this text in academically significant ways.

➢ Students are a part of a social process which allows then to construct new meanings based on their experiences and these meanings are shaped and reinforced by their classroom experiences.

➢ Instructor becomes the guide through which students develop critical analysis skills that emerge in a “real-world” setting.

➢ Instructor facilitates student progression to ever more sophisticated interpretations and understandings of community and social issues.

➢ Lasting communication and analytical skills are developed for students through interaction with agencies outside the University setting.

Further Readings on this Topic


