Service-Learning Initiative
The Ohio State University

Elements of a Service-Learning Course

A Service-Learning course

- uses experiential strategies characterized by student participation in an organized service activity
- is connected to specific learning outcomes
- meets identified community needs
- provides structured time for students to analyze and connect the service experience to learning

A service-learning course is typically developed as **discipline-based** or **project-based** service-learning. In a discipline-based course, students have a presence in the community throughout the term and complete assignments or participate in discussions to connect the classroom learning with the service activity. An example is students enrolled in a history of the civil rights movement developing and presenting units on some aspect of the movement to students at a local elementary school. This project may be repeated every term with different classes.

Students in a project-based service-learning course use knowledge gained in the course and/or prerequisite courses to work on a community problem or need. The specific service-learning activity in a project-based course is not likely to be repeated. The partnership between the faculty and the community partner may continue with different problems each term. An example is a city and regional planning course collecting and analyzing data to identify frequency and spatial patterns of neighborhood problems and developing recommendations (based on best-practice research) for addressing problems.

Service-learning courses may also be categorized as providing **direct** or **indirect** service. Direct service involves working with others—person to person and face to face. Examples are tutoring or mentoring children or assisting elderly persons. Indirect service typically involves a project with impact on a community as a whole. Examples include designing a playground, collecting data by interviewing community members on a particular issue, studying and making recommendations to solve a problem such as trash pick-up in a community. Indirect service courses may also focus on a research question—finding, gathering, analyzing and reporting information or conducting environmental or other tests, or conducting experiments. Incorporating research into the course with plans to publish the results requires IRB compliance.

An effective service-learning course should include the following core premises: connection to academic learning, analysis of connection between academic content and service, mutual benefit for all involved, student preparation and support, plan for evaluation, and plan for sustainability.

- ***Design of service activity to enhance student learning and community benefit***

Community service is designed and developed to provide a strong connection to academic learning that will enhance student understanding of course content. The service activity must be connected to classroom learning and theory, and community service placements must be connected to course objectives and learning outcomes. The service enhances understanding of the academic content of the course and leads students to apply academic learning in a community setting.

The service activity is designed with clear goals, expectations, and responsibilities for both the faculty and students enrolled in the academic course and the community partner. The service activity is of value to all constituent groups involved. The design also allows for flexibility and change to accommodate changing circumstances. There are clearly established lines of communication that allow for all groups to provide feedback about the service activity.

Example of academic connections: Students in Art Education 795: Art Education as a Community Act worked with 11th grade girls as part of the YWCA Bright Futures project in connecting personal life experiences with concepts expressed in the art of Aminah Robinson. The service experience was designed to enhance OSU student learning by requiring students to rationalize their involvement in community art and to create mission statements reflecting the goals of the community partners. The process was documented in written as well as an art form. The experience contributed to student and community development by including and supporting the YWCA race relations efforts.

Example of mutual benefit: Students in Family Resource Management 611: Consumer Housing Problems participate in an aspect of a community development process, ranging from collecting resident opinions, developing strategies, collecting oral histories, or writing picture books. The projects are developed each year in collaboration with a community group. The projects contribute to student understanding of problems related to obtaining and maintaining secure and standard housing and to community capacity to achieve goals

- ***Student analysis of connection between academic content and service***

The learning experience includes structured time for students and community participants to reflect on and analyze the service experience. Providing structured discussions and/or assignments leading students in reflection of the service fosters student ability to connect the service to content and, conversely, to apply the content to the service experience. Strategies for connection, using a variety of techniques, are woven throughout the course design. Reflection or analysis may be accomplished through a variety of approaches, including (but not limited to) reflective journals (open end or responding to questions), formal writing assignments, classroom discussions, threaded discussions (using web tools), exam questions, and final projects.

Example of student analysis of connection between academic content and service: For their community partners, students in English 567: Rhetoric and Community Service: A Writing Seminar for and with Local Nonprofit Agencies apply rhetorical concepts to practical writing for public audiences, for example, grant proposals, newsletters, websites, promotional material for fundraising events. For the classroom, students practice academic writing (journals, observation inquiry projects, investigation/research papers) in which they explore how nonprofit organizations work as well as the societal issues that are connected to their individual community partner agencies.

- ***Student preparation and support***

Preparation of students for the service activity, whether in class or through electronic interaction, is included in the course plan, including description of the activity, safety, time allocation, schedule, cultural sensitivity, understanding of and training for the tasks and approaches involved, and introduction to the work of the community partner. Student support and monitoring of student participation should continue on a regular basis throughout the quarter.

Example of preparation and support: Preparation may include use of online modules posted on the Service-Learning Initiative website at http://service-learning.osu.edu/ (training on diversity, working with youth), presentation by community partner, or tour of community site. Training may focus on preparation to work with the specific group associated with the service. For example, students in an "Intervening with Literacy" course learn about special considerations when working in a public school setting. Or, students in a Spanish in Ohio course may need to be prepared for working in a health care setting.

- ***Evaluation***

Evaluation of student performance in the service activity is specified, including identification of the evaluator and the criteria for evaluation. Evaluation includes measures of the progress toward meeting the learning and service goals of the course and demonstration of learning based on ability to connect service experience with course content. Evaluation may also include assessment of community outcomes, i.e., to what extent were project goals accomplished?

Example of evaluation: Evaluation is primarily based on the contribution of service to learning in the class, not focused solely on the service itself. One aspect of evaluation of learning is the ability of the student to integrate the course content with the service content, i.e., the ability to use the service as an additional text for the course. Evidence of this ability may come from writing, course discussion, products created during the service activity, feedback from community partner. Some faculty choose to assign points for service participation (usually a relatively small percentage of the total), just as they assign points for participation in class.

- ***Sustainability***

The concept of sustainability in service-learning refers to a number of aspects, including timing (regular weekly schedule versus "homework" assignments) and duration (continual versus term-length activities), length of partnership (needs of partner are a factor), and type of service (project based versus continuing and direct). Within the confines of an offering of a course, regular and frequent student and faculty interaction should be specified. Longer term sustainability is indicated by departmental and faculty commitment to offer the course as a service-learning course.

Example of sustainability: The Department of Spanish and Portuguese began offering Spanish 689: Spanish in Ohio in 1996. Since that time, the course has been offered twice each year during the Winter and Summer Quarters. Partnerships with the Ohio Hispanic Coalition (after school and summer mentoring programs), Mount Carmel Outreach (door-to-door vaccination campaign), and Girl Scouts Seal of Ohio (bilingual day camp) have been ongoing while additional short-term projects have been completed with other community partners. Beginning in Autumn 2006, Spanish 367: Latinos, Language and Literacy, a GEC second writing/social diversity course, has been offered on an annual basis. This course, like English 367C, partners with the Columbus Literacy Council's English as a Second Language tutoring program.