

# Common Questions Faculty ask about Service Learning

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Adapted from *Service learning tip sheets: A faculty resource guide*, Hatcher, J.A., Ed. (1998) Indiana Campus Compact: Indianapolis, IN.

## **What is service learning?**

Service learning is a type of experiential learning that engages students in service within the community as an integrated aspect of a course. Students participate in an organized service activity and reflect on that activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. Service learning engages students in active, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning experiences that meets identified community needs. Service learning classes are offered in many departments and demonstrate the creative expertise of faculty committed to extending disciplinary work into local communities.

## **How is service learning different from other types of practice-based education?**

Clinicals, internships, fieldwork, and co-op programs are designed to provide students with experiences in the community in order to develop professional skills. These practice-based experiences typically occur during the senior year, after necessary coursework is completed. Service learning classes are designed to involve students in community service activities that are linked to specific learning objectives of a course. Service learning includes an integration of theory and practice, with an emphasis on civic responsibility. Students “serve to learn” and “learn to serve”.

## **How do students benefit by taking a service learning class?**

Students in service learning classes report higher gains in academic skills, life skills, and civic development than students who do not participate in service learning. Additionally, students report that service learning helps to clarify career goals, contributes to stronger relationships with peers and faculty, and results in a more satisfying learning experience. A research study conducted among campuses in Indiana indicates that students enrolled in service learning during their first semester on campus persist at a higher rate to year two than students who are not enrolled in a service learning class.

## **Is the service component a required part of a service learning class?**

It depends. In some service learning classes the service experience is an integral part of the course. Students who choose to enroll in this type of class are expected to participate in the service activity in the same way that they are expected to complete a research paper or make a class presentation. In other classes, the service component is an option and may replace another class assignment. Some departments use a “service learning credit option”: students who participate in service learning may elect to enroll for an extra independent study course credit.

## **How much service should I require students to complete in a semester?**

It depends. Just as the length of a research paper varies from course to course, so too does the amount of service. As a rule of thumb, the more often a student goes to the community site, the more benefit is derived from the service experience. Typically, it is recommended that students contribute 2 hours each week for ten weeks for a 3-credit course. However, the service component may be designed to occur less frequently, depending on the needs of the community agency or the learning objectives of the course.

### **Will planning a service learning course take too much of my time?**

It does take time to set up the logistics of a service learning class, to respond to individual students, and to work through the unanticipated challenges of site visitations. But there are ways to minimize the impact of the time by gaining assistance from the Center for Service and Learning, community agency staff, and Service Learning Assistants. CSL staff can meet with you and agency partners to discuss the design and implementation of the course. It does get easier each time you teach a service learning course. The amount of time required is lessened as community partnerships develop over time.

### **Does service learning take too much class time?**

You are still in charge of what class time is used for. Students can reflect on the experience outside class through journals and logs, and more formal papers. Research, however, indicates that devoting time in class to discussing experiences that emerge from the service experience will increase student learning and satisfaction with the course. If the students' experiences become text for the class, they will integrate what they are learning as they discuss, make connections to course materials, and listen to the experience of others.

### **How do I evaluate the students' performance?**

Service learning is often defined with an emphasis on learning. Many teachers do not change their evaluation technique, but assume that the service heightens student learning, and that monitoring the service contribution is all that is necessary. On the other hand, you might have specific papers devoted to reflecting on the experience, and grade those for analysis, critical thinking, and other standards normally used. Faculty who utilize service learning must generate data documenting the impact that this pedagogy has on student learning. Otherwise the question, "Why should I utilize service learning if it doesn't work any better than what I am already doing?" is a legitimate one. There are a number of outcomes that can be assessed. These include: impact on student learning; impact on the agency; impact on those being served; and impact on faculty development.

### **How can involvement in service learning strengthen my professional research?**

Many professional academic associations now include sessions on service learning and civic engagement at national and regional conferences. Associations such as Campus Compact, Indiana Campus Compact, National Society for Experiential Education, and the American Association of Higher Education hold annual conferences and provide opportunities to present papers on service learning and the scholarship of engagement. Additionally, special issues of professional journals now feature service learning as a topic of inquiry. Involvement in service learning can augment and redirect one's professional research interests, especially when a strong partnership is created with the community agency. The CSL can provide assistance on designing research on service learning, scholarly publications, or grant proposals.

### **What risks are involved in service learning?**

University insurance typically does not cover service learning activities off campus. Students are to be considered as volunteers and it is up to each agency to determine the need for volunteer insurance and limited criminal history checks. Students need to be informed of potential risks before they volunteer. Students can sign an informed consent form indicating they are aware of risks and will not hold the university liable in the case of an accident. Information on risk management and a sample Informed Consent Form is available at the Center for Service and Learning. These steps should be considered in course planning:

- Prepare an Informed Consent Form listing the specifics of each student's service. Include number of hours volunteering, projects and duties performed, and products to be completed.
  - Discuss in class the risks involved in the community service, as well as the benefits and the skills required.
  - Talk with the agency supervisor about their insurance for volunteers, or contact the service coordinator on campus for a list of community agencies already approved.
  - Set up a line of communication with the agency supervisor for students to report any difficulties.
  - Create a service learning contract between the student and the organization listing the community service, the learning objectives, and the date of completed projects and time requirements.
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