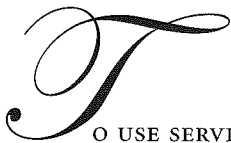## Chapter Two

# Best Practices for Creating Quality Service-Learning Courses

AMY HENDRICKS

O USE SERVICE-LEARNING IN A COURSE, faculty members must make a number of decisions before ever stepping into the classroom. Initial "thought work" includes gaining a thorough understanding of the pedagogy of service-learning, as well as visualizing how service-learning will change the way the course is currently taught. This preliminary work will provide a sound basis for creating an effective service-learning course and help guide the design process.

This chapter offers a step-by-step guide to planning and implementing service-learning in the classroom, from goal setting to specific actions needed to design the course, choose a service site, determine the most effective type of service, and document and evaluate learning. Several appendices offer examples of forms covering everything from student applications to progress reports to final evaluations. Finally, a quick reference section provides 10 keys to creating a quality service-learning syllabus.

## Preliminary Work

A faculty member who is considering using service-learning is his or her classes needs to think through the following issues before beginning course design.

### Articulate the Reason for Service-Learning

It is important to establish and communicate why you believe a service-learning component will enhance the learning experience in your course and engage students in the civic life of their communities. If you do not fully understand why you're using service-learning, the students won't either. Be prepared not only to tell your students about the service-learning opportunity available in your course but also to explain how it will enhance your course curriculum and how they will benefit from it.

In most cases, service is optional rather than required, so you will need to make a strong case. You will no doubt view service as a great opportunity, but your savvy (and skeptical) students, who have come of age in a world geared to consumer mar-

keting, will want proof that this is not just a way to get them to do extra work. You will need to convey to students, preferably from the first day of class, why service-learning is enriching and fulfilling and why it should be viewed as part of the class, not as an extraneous add-on. If they view it as something "extra," students will likely resist the idea.

Review your curriculum and course objectives and visualize how a service-learning component would bring these objectives to life. Many institutions use a standardized syllabus template that requires faculty to include a list of course objectives that are agreed upon by various committees and approved by the state. Not surprisingly, such lists are often dry and full of academic jargon that is foreign and unattractive to students, especially those who have not yet chosen a major. A list of course objectives is a perfect opportunity to point out to students how service-learning can enrich the course and make it more meaningful and even more fun.

Additionally, service-learning can be used to link your course objectives to the larger goal of civic engagement in the lives of college students. Student may not realize the impact that biology has on the larger community—it may seem like a lot of difficult facts and formulae, not a force for change in society. Applying the facts learned in class to a problem in the community reinforces those connections in ways that a lecture could never do.

Take, for example, a course on government. One objective in such a course is to understand the role of elections in political life: how they work, how campaigns are funded, the qualifications candidates must have in order to run, and so forth. These facts may be exciting to the professor, but many students will find them fairly dry, if not stiflingly boring. Think how much more students would learn if they were working on a campaign at the same time that they were learning about elections in class. It would not be surprising if these students found discrepancies in the textbook version and the real-life version of campaigns and elections, which could lead to insightful discussions about such subjects as the role of money, the "insider" game, the role of political party operatives, and many other aspects of campaigning that might not be covered by the book.

Think also about how these students might feel about their role as citizens after seeing the effects of their work on the campaign. These students would learn to care who got elected after seeing the power of those in office. They would likely never miss an opportunity to vote again. Just one student's experience could bring life to the entire class during class discussions. The faculty member must see these connections, believe in them, and be able to convey them to students in order to "sell" the service-learning idea.

### Recognize That Service-Learning Will Change How You Teach

Using service-learning as a teaching tool means giving up control. Having students learn outside the classroom means that some of their learning will be unknown to you. You will be called upon to react to the new experiences that they bring to the class, rather than control what is distributed to them; this means that you will not be able to control the context of discussions as much as before. This change can be disturbing to an instructor used to a high degree of organization and time management in the classroom. But unless the instructor is willing to let go and grasp the "teachable moment," students' service experience will be stunted.

A newcomer to service-learning should be open to using class discussion as a tool. In most cases, you will have some students performing service and some (probably most) who are not. The key is to be prepared to let those who are performing service relate their experiences to you and the other students in an atmosphere conducive to open discussion, but one that focuses on course objectives.

Because service-learning students are likely to bring real-world dilemmas and questions back to the classroom, the answers may not always be immediately at hand. There may be times when you will have to say, "I don't know the answer to that." This is not a drawback. In fact, these moments are excellent opportunities to teach students *how to learn.* You can simply follow up by saying, "I'll find out." Students will recognize and respect the love of learning in this response.

Before using a service-learning component, faculty members should think about their own teaching and learning style and note where adjustments might have to be made in dealing with this unique learning tool.

### Begin with the End in Mind

Before creating a service-learning course component, it is important to identify goals for the students in your class. This involves visualizing students who have completed the service-learning portion of the course. How will those students' learning differ from that of the students who did not participate in service-learning? While they are performing the service, what connections do you want the students to make with the material in your course? Outcomes from students include their own personal growth, career choices, social skills, and the pure academic benefit of better understanding the material (Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997). Perhaps most important of all, the experience will teach civic engagement.

For instance, one academic goal for veterinary technology students serving at the local Humane Society is to understand animal care more fully. But these students may also be expected to grow as members of society, better understanding their role as citizens and stewards of the ecological system in which they live. They will learn what they can and cannot expect from government, from citizen organizations, and from the general public. They will learn who needs to be educated about their sub-

ject, and why. Most important, they will understand their own ability to change society. Other goals have to do with students' personal growth: discerning whether veterinary technology is a field they truly want to work in; understanding their own social and political views in more depth; gaining experience in areas such as social interaction, diversity, and tolerance.

The goals for students should focus on both *service* and *learning*. Service to the community means that the need for the students' service and the issues addressed must be *from the community*—not something the teacher or students think up and then tell the community they will supply. This idea is linked to the concept of "ownership" in the community: the service itself is owned by, and is a reflection of, the community. The focus on learning is equally important; service with no connection to the course content is volunteerism, not service-learning. Finally, service that does not fit the needs of the student is unjustified. The student should grow from the experience as an individual and a member of society; if that goal is not being achieved, the service should be reevaluated. All of these connections between service and learning must be conceptualized before introducing the idea to the class.

This step also requires faculty members to think through the concrete aspects of the service experience they want their students to study, or at least pay careful attention to, during their service. If a psychology professor sends students to a mental health facility, for example, he or she won't be there to guide them in person. Students become their own teachers at the service site; the professor back at the college can help by supplying them in advance with guidelines and tools. In this case, students might be told to observe the psycho-social factors contributing to a patient's condition, the efficacy of certain therapies, the interaction between clients and service providers, and their own feelings when confronted with mentally ill patients.

In short, students setting out on a service experience need guidance on how to turn that service into learning. This requires vision on the part of the instructor.

### Identify Support Structures

Before getting started, find out what resources are available at your institution to help you develop a service-learning course. Procedures will differ greatly depending on whether a formal service-learning center exists at your institution and, if it does, the extent of its maturity and institutionalization. The following section on course design includes a discussion of the options for supplying the "people power" necessary to create a successful service-learning course component if you do not have a formal center.

## Steps in Course Design

### Decide Whether Service Will Be Optional or Required

The first decision to be made is whether to require service-learning or to offer it as an option. One may question whether service work, by definition, can be "required." Service-learning is different from traditional volunteer work, however. Since the service is a tool for meeting course learning objectives, faculty members can require service in the community as part of the course as long as they have considered factors such as accommodating students with disabilities or restrictive schedules. If the course offers a variety of service sites as options, this is usually not a hindrance.

If you decide to require service-learning, it is important to make the requirement clearly known to students while they still have the chance to opt out of the course. For example, the requirement should be listed in the college catalog, the course or class webpage if available, and in the syllabus distributed on the first day of class. If a student objects to the requirement, he or she should be able to exit the class during the add/drop period at no charge. In short, the sooner this requirement is known, and in great detail, the better.

Requiring service-learning, rather than offering it as an option, allows all students in the class to share the benefits of the experience. Recently at Brevard Community College, a biology professor required her students to participate in a "Pond Legacy Project" as a part of a Fundamentals of Biology class. This course, which counts toward the science requirement for the Associate in Arts degree, is meant for non–science majors. But it's likely that this professor tempted a few students to switch majors after the experience of creating a native plant habitat around a retention pond at a nearby public park.

In this community, retention ponds are necessary to prevent flooding, so they are common, but rarely attractive or serviceable beyond their basic function. In this case, a large pond was created to store water; with students' efforts, it also became a beautiful landscape, a water-testing site, and a native wildlife habitat. The students were able to practice many learning objectives in their service-learning experience: they used GPS equipment to station water testing and planting sites, they identified native plants best suited to the habitat, and they actively participated in water testing and data analysis. In addition, they worked with local high school students assigned to the same project and were charged with coming to a consensus on the plants to incorporate, the development of a mapping system, and the actual planting of native specimens.

The students came away with Fundamentals of Biology not only in their notebooks, but also under their fingernails and in their lungs. Our college students applied the facts and formulae they learned in the classroom, but also mentored younger students from the nearby high schools, building their leadership skills. Best of all, they learned what united community members can do to make publicly owned land best

serve the larger community. Every time the students or their family and friends come to the park, they feel a sense of ownership and efficacy that cannot come from any other type of college classroom experience. Whether they would have had the same sense of collective ownership in a class that offered service-learning as an option, adopted by only some students, is an open question.

Another option is to offer a "pure" or stand-alone service-learning course. Such courses are based on the pedagogy of civic engagement, and many of the hours of "class time" are spent in the community. In essence, the community is the classroom. Students are usually self-directed in their learning. Service sites can vary dramatically; they are often chosen by the students based on an agree-upon curriculum, decided by consensus during the first weeks of class. The required number of hours can vary, but 30+ hours is typical for a 16-week semester. Chapter 3 of this publication discusses stand-alone service-learning courses in greater depth.

In the community college setting, requiring community service in a class is still relatively rare. In most cases the instructor chooses to offer service-learning as an option, either to bolster a grade (extra credit on a particular assignment or on the class as a whole) or to replace a grade that can be earned by another assignment in the class (such as a paper or exam).

The Brevard Community College website features a number of helpful syllabi that discuss some attractive assignments that you might consider in determining whether to require service for a class. (See www.brevard.cc.fl.us; click on Education, then on Center for Service-Learning.)

Some examples of how to incorporate service-learning into different types of classes, drawn from actual courses, follow.

**Chemistry.** Students have the option to tutor K-12 science students for at least 20 hours during a semester. Those who complete the hours and a detailed journal documenting how the experience affected them academically and personally receive a 10% increase on their exam average.

**Psychology.** In this class, 20 hours of service in an approved service site, plus a reflective journal, may exempt the student from the comprehensive final exam. Students must serve at a social service agency that aids individuals in crisis in areas such as homelessness, drug addiction, domestic violence, poverty, mental illness, or joblessness. As this instructor puts it, "they won't remember my final exam in two years, but they will always remember what they learned from their service experience."

**Veterinary Technology.** A minimum of 20 hours of service at a nonprofit veterinary clinic, animal rescue, or pet therapy center, along with a reflective journal meeting exact criteria, earns the student exemption from the comprehensive final exam.

**Political Science.** A minimum of 15 hours of service in a government office, campaign, or nonprofit agency receiving state or federal funding, plus a detailed journal critiquing the agency based on what was learned in class, earns three extra points on the final grade.

**Speech Communications.** A student can serve for 15-20 hours at any community agency identified by the Center for Service-Learning, either to replace one of the required class speeches or to add 10–20 extra credit points to the final grade (student's option).

**Statistics.** A student can earn a 5% increase in his or her final grade by serving at least 15 hours in an approved community site and submitting a one-page statistical report. The data analysis submitted must contain at least one inferential statistical analysis performed on data related to the agency, with the research question posed by the student. Alternatively, the class as a group may perform statistical analysis for a nonprofit agency, working as a team to solve specific problems and produce usable data for the agency. This structure not only works well for the students but also provides valuable information for the agency that would otherwise be expensive to obtain.

**American History.** In lieu of writing a research paper or a series of book reviews, a student can participate in a service-learning experience (20 hours minimum) and complete both a daily journal and a formal reflection paper relating the value of the experience to the course and discussing how the service affected the student individually.

**Introduction to Education.** Prospective teachers in this class are required to spend 10 hours in a public school classroom assisting a teacher and 5 hours tutoring students. They have several service-learning options for fulfilling these requirements. For the tutoring, they can work within the school system or with a reading program; they can also work with the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program or the Junior Achievement program throughout the semester.

## Identify Service Sites

The first step in identifying service sites is to identify community needs and the sites that are available to meet those needs. A number of resources can help in developing a list of sites, including the following (adapted from Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997):

- Your college center for service-learning
- A community-run volunteer center (many cities and counties operate such nonprofit organizations to connect citizens to agencies in need)
- The United Way
- Print or online telephone directories
- Social service agencies in your community, such as those that deal with children, the elderly, or the sick

- Hospitals and nursing homes
- School boards
- Local, state, and federal government offices
- Mental health facilities, including drug rehabilitation centers
- Child-care centers
- Neighborhood organizations, such as those focused on preventing crime, controlling litter, or building playgrounds
- Churches and other houses of worship
- Police precinct offices
- Chambers of commerce
- Area colleges and universities

The initial contact list can be compiled by the faculty member, the students, the center for service-learning at the institution, or a combination of the above. There are a number of opinions about the value of having students find the community partners to serve. To do so brings the student in contact with many groups in the community and calls upon them to discern and evaluate community need. These actions can help students build leadership and social skills and hone decision-making abilities. It also allows students to pursue their personal interests with the possible result of a better match between the learner and the community partner.

On the other hand, at least some significant guidance on the part of the instructor and/or the center for service-learning can guard against potential failure in this area. Students may not consider certain issues such as safety, liability, or special needs of the agency (such as time commitments). Some students may find the task so overwhelming that they give up on service-learning altogether. Therefore, at a minimum, guided site selection is recommended; better still is a collaborative effort to compile a list of potential sites.

Factors to consider in site selection include general appropriateness, site diversity, safety, infrastructure, and special requirements.

**Appropriateness.** Does the site address a legitimate community need? At first glance it may seem that any demonstrable need could be a service opportunity, but some selection criteria need to be thought through ahead of time. We have had students come up with some unusual options when left to their own devices: babysitting their younger siblings, working for no pay at their parents' business, volunteering at a lawyer's office, helping their church raise funds. It's not always easy to dismiss these options. For instance, what if the lawyer's office is hosting a fundraiser for leukemia research? What if the church uses some of its funds to feed the hungry? Can a student work on those projects and call it community service?

The key is to identify who benefits from the students' service and to identify whether the need is *public* or *private*. A public need serves the larger community and has ramifications beyond the student: rehabilitating former drug addicts at a center run by professionals benefits society; trying to help one's drug-addicted brother is private. Working for free at a for-profit business contributes to the private gain of the business owner; working at a fundraiser for cancer research benefits society. A community child-care center provides a social resource for those in need; babysitting one's siblings fills a private need within a family.

Many service sites have a connection to a specific church or faith, and you should carefully think through this issue as well. Many churches and religious groups serve the community in very meaningful ways, but if your students are doing "service" by proselytizing a specific faith, you have probably crossed a line into the private arena.

**Diversity of Sites.** How many sites should be among the choices for students? It may seem that the more sites you have on your list, the better. However, if students have free reign to choose from hundreds of sites you may be faced with a new set of problems. Too many different experiences may interfere with your ability to integrate student experiences into the course curriculum. It may also overwhelm students and actually turn them off to the experience.

On the other hand, too small a range of sites may not accommodate the students' interests or the learning objectives of your course. By limiting sites to a very small number, you may inadvertently exclude a group of students based on gender, ethnicity, or age. For example, if all of your sites are in low-income Latino communities, those with limited Spanish-speaking skills may shy away. Some agencies take only one gender as volunteers, such as group homes for male or female children. Other sites require a higher degree of maturity and/or time commitment, which may exclude younger students.

We recommend compiling a fairly large array of sites to accommodate many interests, students, and academic courses, but tailoring the choices for the students when arranging choices for a particular course. For instance, a mathematics instructor might give the students 10 or 15 options for sites whose experience will fit the math curriculum, but inform students that she will consider other options if the student sees a need and can relate that need to the course content. A government professor might require students to work for a local or state government agency (which can encompass dozens of sites, including public schools), but exclude other types of agencies.

**Safety Issues.** As in the field of medicine, the first rule of service in the community is to do no harm, either to the service-learning students or to those they serve. Safety factors are extremely important, and this is one area that may be overlooked by students if they are left to locate community partners on their own. Indeed, the agency itself may not have considered all angles of safety if they have not used volunteers or

service learners to a great extent; if they're used to having only trained personnel on site the agency may not have considered what the untrained volunteer might encounter.

Consider a service-learner in a mental health facility who could be physically attacked by a patient (this has happened), or students who might be asked to operate machinery or tools, spend long hours in the sun, clear out poisonous vegetation from a park, or spend time with people who are ill. These factors do not have to exclude a site as a potential community partner, but the issues should be carefully considered both in choosing sites and in pairing particular students with sites. Who is available to supervise the students? What should the students do if faced with a challenging situation? What is the potential for harm?

**Available Infrastructure.** A site may have a great need for people to help them but lack the internal infrastructure to handle student workers. Questions to consider include: If the site is staffed only part-time, will students be asked to fill in the gaps? Does the site have staff who can effectively train, supervise, and evaluate students? Is anyone available to document the hours students have served or sign off on the project they have completed?

Some agencies with the most pressing needs cannot handle these challenges. Again, this does not mean that they should be eliminated as potential sites, but some adjustments might have to be made in the kind of service offered. For instance, instead of on-site placement, students may be able to carry out a project or create a product for the agency. A microeconomics class might prepare a model budget for a nonprofit agency that deals with abandoned animals, or a mass media class could produce a short ad for a group advocating litter control. These activities can be done in the classroom, either by the entire class or by individuals.

**Special Requirements.** Finally, one must ask whether the sites have any special requirements, such as mandatory training or a required time commitment. Some agencies require extensive training (such as a guardian ad litum program) and naturally do not want their newly trained helpers to contribute only a few hours of service and then leave. Some agencies, particularly those dealing with children, require fingerprinting and background checks; some require drug tests; some are physically demanding or cannot accommodate those with disabilities; some require a high level of maturity, such as sites that deal with clients' sensitive personal information.

All of these considerations must be taken into account when devising the list of sites. A separate file should be kept on each site with contact information and any special needs to help best match the site with the course and with the individual student.

### Decide on the Type of Service

Once the sites are determined, it's time to decide on the parameters of the service the students can and should provide. Options to consider include short-term service, ongoing service, and class projects.

**Short-Term Service.** Short-term or one-time service requires less time commitment than other options but can have a big impact, and can often serve to pique the interest of a student who is only marginally attracted to the idea of community service. These short-term commitments are aimed at achieving a specific goal, including increasing public awareness of an issue, completing a task, or creating a product. Examples include building a wildlife habitat with a local nonprofit agency, painting a mural at a community center, working on a political campaign, or compiling an oral history project.

Some short-term projects bring together people from across the community, or even the state or region. Examples include one-day "Into the Street" projects, Habitat for Humanity building projects, "Adopt a Road" projects, fundraisers for specific causes such as medical research, and public service fairs or festivals. These types of short-term projects provide opportunities for students to serve the community and become acquainted with community needs in a short amount of time.

**Ongoing Service or Placement.** Placement at an agency implies that the student will serve over a period time that can extend indefinitely, with the student returning to the site on a regular basis, usually a few hours per week. These placements are probably the most typical form of service-learning work. Students can tutor young children in the America Reads program, serve as a Big Brother or Big Sister, volunteer in a hospice organization, aid an elementary school teacher, care for animals at the Humane Society, or choose one of thousands of other options. It is not uncommon for a student to begin by committing to the minimum number of hours required for class credit (such as 20 hours over a semester) but continue long afterwards when bonds are forged with the agency and those it serves.

**A Class Project or Product.** The instructor also may elect to engage the entire class in a service-learning project as part of the course requirement or as extra credit. In this case the class works as a team to complete a project within the confines of the classroom. For instance, students in one state and local government class wrote a guidebook to their county government. The class devised the sections to be covered and did the research and writing in groups. The resulting product was distributed to local libraries and schools for use by members of the public. In another example, a graphic design class designed a brochure for a local animal adoption agency. In a third case, a statistics class performed various analyses for a nonprofit agency that would otherwise have had to contract out the work at significant cost. In all of these cases the students learned volumes about the assigned material while serving the community, and they did not have to leave the classroom to do it.

These are just some examples of how service can be defined. Combinations of the above categories also exist, as do any number of variations on the general theme.

### Determine the Level of Service

To determine how service will be calculated into a course grade, the instructor must first decide on the minimum level of service. With a project or product, it is the outcome that is graded, not necessarily the time spent in service (although in some cases it is also appropriate to document time). With an ongoing placement, students need to document the hours they serve. In either case, someone at the placement site should oversee the student and sign off on the service completed (e.g., project/product completion, number of hours served).

One option in determining the appropriate number of hours to be served in a placement situation is to estimate the time that would be spent on other assignments in the class, such as the time it would take to prepare for tests or the time typically needed to research and write a term paper. We have found that about 20 hours in a 16-week semester is a good starting point. Students often continue service far beyond this mark, perhaps because after 20 hours of service they feel vested in the agency, having developed connections with people at the site and institutional knowledge of the service the agency provides. On the other hand, 20 hours is very doable for most students since it requires only 1–2 hours per week on average.

What is critical in this process is obtaining the best possible fit between the *needs of the community partner*, the *type of project* (short-term, ongoing, class project), the *needs of the student*, and the *course objectives*. The first thing to determine is community need. All service must stem from that question. The type of service provided and the hours required should match the characteristics and needs of the community partner. Next, ask how students will benefit, academically and otherwise. What will they gain from this experience? How does this experience fit the objectives of the course?

One way to find the answers to these questions is to measure the agency's expectations. A useful resource for this purpose is a "Community Service-Learning Job Description" (see Appendix 2A at the end of this chapter). This job description asks the community partner to identify key information about service positions available:

- Qualifications required (e.g., minimum age, physical requirements, background checks, etc.)
- Duties and responsibilities
- Time commitment expected
- Type of orientation required/provided
- Benefits for students
- Open-ended comments

Asking these pertinent questions is the first step in identifying best possible fit.

### Communicate with the Agency

As in all aspects of social interaction, communication is critical to establishing realistic expectations on both sides. Again, the "Community Service-Learning Job Description" is a good place to start. Establishing regular and structured communication between the student, the agency, and the faculty member is key. Following are some ideas for how to manage this important area.

**Define Expectations in Writing.** At our institution, service-learning students and the agencies at which they serve sign a "Mutual Expectations Agreement" (see Appendix 2B, part of the form entitled "Placement Confirmation"). By signing this document, the agency commits to provide the following:

- An accurate position description, training, and assistance
- Supervision, feedback, and evaluation of the student
- Respect for the individual and learning needs of the student
- Meaningful tasks related to the student's learning objectives
- Appreciation and recognition of the student's contributions
- A safe and appropriate working environment

In return, the student commits to do the following:

- Perform duties to the best of his or her ability
- Adhere to the agency's rules and policies, including confidentiality
- Be open to supervision and instruction
- Meet time and duty commitments, or provide notice when that is not possible

When both parties sign this contract they are made to understand the seriousness of their mutual commitment (we advocate using this strong term). This type of written agreement can relieve a great deal of misunderstanding down the road. Along with the job description, this document goes a long way to define expectations and relieve uncertainty.

**Establish the Means and Frequency of Communication among All Parties.** It is possible to head off issues about student performance with a good means of open communication. It is important to identify a specific contact person at the agency and at the college (whether a faculty member, someone from the service-learning center, or both). A schedule of communication should be established as well. This can be formalized, as in a weekly or monthly written communication, or it can be as simple as the faculty member picking up the phone and asking the agency representative how students are doing. Better yet, the faculty member can visit the site during service hours and see and hear how the students are doing.

Likewise, students should be made aware of opportunities to communicate with the agency supervisors and their instructors. Make sure to ask questions about their service during the semester. A good way to do this is to ask during class time, which can prompt students to share some details about their site with the class.

It is especially valuable for the agency representative to evaluate the student's service in writing. The comments of the agency become a part of the student's service-learning record and can even serve as a part of a resume to help a job-seeking student demonstrate skills and work attitude. The following section discusses documentation that can aid in this process. (Note: most of the forms we use come in duplicate or triplicate; students get a copy for their own records.)

### Document Service

A record of service is important for a number of reasons:

- It provides data on the impact of service-learning (number of students placed, community partners/members reached, hours served, etc.). This helps prove efficacy to the college administration and may strengthen the case for the award of grants and hard money in the annual budget.

- It provides a means of establishing student recognition for use in awarding scholarships, graduation honors, or other special recognition.

- It provides a record of accomplishment for the student to keep.

- It helps faculty members and/or the center for service-learning monitor the fit between students and community partners.

- It helps community partners understand how best to use service-learning students to achieve their goals

- It guides students in identifying their goals for academic and personal growth while practicing service-learning.

The service-learning center—or, in the absence of a formal center, the faculty member organizing the service—should keep a file on each student who applies to be a service-learner with his or her record of service while at the college. Roger Henry, in his chapter of *Successful Service-Learning Programs* (1998), suggests that student applications be organized using the following rubric:

- *Pending:* Student has applied and is waiting for placement confirmation

- *Referred:* Student has an appointment with the agency or a date set for orientation

- *Placed:* Student has formally committed to an agency and is doing community work

- *Canceled:* Student never began service assignment

- *Closed:* Student began service project but did not complete required service

- *Completed:* Student has completed service commitment

Our institution uses a series of forms to document placement, hours served (or project completed), evaluation of service, and other aspects of the service-learning experience. Appendices C through H of this chapter provide examples for your reference and use. Following are brief descriptions to help guide your choices in using this type of documentation. (Additional forms for stand-alone service-learning courses appear in Chapter 3.)

**Student Application Form (Appendix 2C).** The first step for a student interested in service-learning is to fill out an application form. This form is used for basic reference and contact information and opens the student file. Ideally a staff member at a service-learning center will interview the student at the time he or she submits an application form.

**Student Service-Learning Status Form (Appendix 2D).** The Center for Service-Learning at Brevard gives this document to faculty members 3–4 weeks into a regular (16-week) semester. They are asked to circulate it in their classes to determine what service-learning projects students are already participating in or are interested in participating in. These lists help the Center maintain an accurate database of students who have been placed and who need to be placed. It also serves as a way to remind students that there is still time to participate in service-learning.

**Mid-Semester Progress Report (Appendix 2E).** This form is a great means of communicating with the agency about the staff's impression of the students. By asking about key traits such as dependability, initiative, and attitude, it also serves as an excellent method by which to head off possible problems before they become significant.

**Hour Report/SHOAT Verification and Final Evaluation (Appendix 2F).** This form documents the hours served in an ongoing placement. SHOAT stands for Service Hours On Academic Transcript. At our institution all hours that a student serves in the community that are documented through the Center for Service-Learning are recorded on the student's academic transcript, right next to the cumulative GPA. For instance, at the end of a student's transcript you might see the following:

> *Degree Awarded:* Associate of Arts
> *Cumulative GPA:* 3.75
> *Community Service-Learning Hours Completed:* 82

The Hour Report/SHOAT Verification Form is the formal instrument through which the Center keeps track of each student's hours and conveys those hours to the registrar. Hours are documented daily or weekly and signed off on by the agency or project supervisor. At the end of the service period (usually at the end of the semester), the supervisor signs form to verify the total number of hours worked.

Equally important, the supervisor evaluates the student on the quality of service provided (from "needs help" to "excellent") using six criteria:

- Attendance
- Dependability
- Responsibility
- Initiative
- Attitude
- Cooperation

The supervisor is also invited to add open-ended comments, and we've found that they typically do spend the time to give thoughtful (and usually very positive) feedback about their student workers.

The faculty member, the student, and the Center for Service-Learning all receive copies of this document. Faculty members usually receive it from the students in the last few weeks of the semester; it's always a special moment when students proudly present evidence of what they've been doing outside of class all term. We try to spend some extra time with students on that day going over their evaluation with them. This often elicits an enthusiastic discussion from the students about what they learned at the service site.

**Student Service-Learning Questionnaire (Appendix 2G).** Faculty members receive this form to distribute to each of their service-learning students toward the end of the semester. The form asks students a series of questions about their experience and how it has affected them personally: in their choice of major, their career plans, their grades, their understanding of the course material, and their attitude towards the community, among other things. It also asks them to rate the effectiveness of the Center for Service-Learning. This information is used to improve the program, but also to demonstrate the return on investment in service-learning. We have learned that our program improves retention as well as having an impact on career choice and students' personal attitudes.

### Evaluate Learning

An important piece of service-learning is to determine how learning will be measured when it is taking place outside of "regular" class. How do you know whether your students are meeting the course objectives through their service? How do you know whether they are gaining personal insights, knowledge of the community, and awareness of their own role in the community? Talking to them periodically can reveal a great deal, but something more formal and reliable is necessary.

The course should include a means of reflection—a method by which students can evaluate what they have gained from their service experience, both personally and as it relates to the course objectives. A great variety of reflection exercises are available, such as writing, group discussion, and even visual art projects. The key is that the faculty member needs to guide the reflection (it is, after all, just as much a part of the

class as tests and term papers), and the reflection should produce a tangible result that the faculty member can evaluate.

Some evaluation tools that we have found effective include journals or essays, presentations, and tangible projects.

**A Journal or Essay.** Students sometimes balk at writing, but their reflection journals and essays are often stunning. We recommend guiding the student but making this assignment significantly less structured than a research assignment. In urging students to connect what they've learned to the course objectives, you might ask them to answer pointed questions in the journal or essay: Whom did the community partner you worked with serve? What were the significant social problems confronted by the agency? What do you think are the causes of these problems? What did you do to affect this issue? What more could have been done? What impediments do you see before this agency in its quest to improve the community? Questions such as these prompt students to go beyond a simple explanation of the duties and tasks they performed.

**A Speech or Presentation to the Class.** Just as much preparation and creativity can go into an oral presentation as into an essay or journal. One option is for several students who served at the same site to present together, contrasting and comparing their experiences or perceptions. Student might present their findings in the form of an organized class discussion or debate, asking the class to participate in their learning. They might even bring to class a person who was served by the agency, or (with the person's permission), details from his or her personal story.

**A Tangible Product or Project.** Some examples of a product include a promotional video or brochure created by a media class, an educational puppet show performed at a children's center, the eradication of non-native plant species in a public park, and repair of old air conditioning units at a senior center. In all of these cases, students should be asked to express what they learned from completing the project or creating the product.

How the instructor incorporates this experience into the final grade is an individual decision. Examples were given earlier in this chapter, but some options include offering extra credit on the final grade (e.g., 20 hours of service and a five-page journal garners five extra points on the final grade), accepting the service-learning component in lieu of a comprehensive final exam, or accepting service-learning in lieu of another assignment in the class, such as a paper or speech.

## Troubleshoot Problems

Following is a list of possible critical incidents or concerns that might arise with a service-learning placement:

- The student does not contact his or her service site.

- The student makes initial contact and/or visits the site, but no one from the college calls to see whether the visit was a success.
- The student makes one visit but doesn't go back and there is no communication from either the student or the agency.
- Logistical impediments (time commitments, travel, agency fit) result in an unsatisfactory placement.
- Orientation is too time-consuming, too minimal, or does not seem to apply to academic work.
- The student or the agency fails to plan adequately.
- Lack of appreciation for each service-learning role—that of the student, the agency supervisor, or the college facilitator—leads to resentment.
- Lack of understanding or recognition of others' perspectives, cultural differences, or values causes misunderstandings.
- Over-concern about liability on part of the agency, program, or student interferes with the ability to get work done.
- The agency is over-concerned about students' maturity and ability to maintain confidentiality and professionalism.
- The agency needs/wants student workers but has no support structure in place.
- The agency sees students as free labor pool and assigns them to tasks that are inappropriate, not meaningful, or outside their abilities.
- Students become "crunched" at certain times of the semester (mid-terms, finals, term paper time) and service falls off.
- After a period of time in placement, the student becomes disenchanted and loses interest.
- Students suffer end-of-semester burnout, including concern about grades, time constraints, and uncertainty about how to end the relationship with the agency.
- The agency does not provide evaluation and feedback on the service experience.

Being prepared for these issues is the key to working around them. At times the problem may simply be a bad match between the student and agency, and the solution is to terminate it. At other times a phone call or email will clear up the problem instantly. There are no pat answers as every situation is unique, but good communication between the agency, the faculty member, the center, and the student is the best way not only to head off problems but also to clear the air when they arise.

## Staff for Success

Now the key question: How can you get all of this done? A great deal of activity must take place to produce a quality experience for the students and the community partner. This section offers two perspectives: how to accomplish this activity through a center for service-learning, and how to solicit help from others if you do not have a formal center.

Following is a list of activities that a service-learning center may be able to perform. Note that this list is comprehensive; even a mature center is unlikely to be able to do every task. Therefore, use this list as a goal and build the program as you gain expertise, staff, contacts, and, especially, budget.

Activities that a service-learning center may be able to perform:

- Student placement (identification of sites; management of safety and legal issues; tracking of sites' capacity, hours of operation, need, clients served, and appropriateness for college students; formatting of options for student access).
- Contact with individual instructors about appropriate sites for their courses.
- Background checks for students, where appropriate.
- Training, where necessary.
- Assistance for students, faculty, and community agencies when questions or problems arise.
- Record keeping (placements, hours served, evaluation).
- Contact with Admissions/Registration to document hours on transcripts.
- Recognition (events, certificates, awards) for all stakeholders.
- Facilitation of reflection activities.
- Provision of readings and assignments that can be used in multiple disciplines.
- Continued contact with community partners to reassess needs of the agency and community on an ongoing basis.
- Gathering of information from community agencies to facilitate evaluation of student performance.
- Awarding of scholarships to students.
- Publicity for the service-learning program, both internally (for faculty, staff, administration, students) and externally (for community members, media); creation of publications, brochures, articles, annual reports.
- Recruitment of new faculty to create service-learning course components, including provision of literature, models, and other information.

- Distribution of stipends to faculty who develop new courses.

If you do not have a center for service-learning, these tasks will fall to the staff and faculty members who run the program, hopefully with some release time from their other duties. This may see overwhelming, but remember that services need not be on the scale indicated above.

Several options exist for soliciting help from other sources. If the facilitator can obtain control of some scholarship hours, these can be awarded to students who assist in setting up and maintaining the program. Student assistants, employed by the college and assigned to particular departments or faculty members, can serve in the same capacity. It is even possible to use graduate assistants from partnering universities, especially those conducting research in the area of community involvement or social work. Finally, the agencies themselves that are seeking assistance from the college may be able to conduct some of these tasks.

## Ten Keys to Creating a Quality Service-Learning Syllabus

We conclude with a short summary of ten key characteristics of an effective service-learning course component. The syllabus is the most important course document the student will receive during the semester, conveying the faculty member's hopes and expectations for the course. When it comes to service-learning, the syllabus is especially important as a means of explaining why the program is offered and what the benefits are to the student and to the class as a whole.

As Heffernan (2001) notes, however, it's not easy to clearly convey the meaning and function of service-learning to students in a syllabus. She found that many service-learning syllabi were "overwhelming and confusing" and that they could easily be full of "gaps, leaps, and assumptions" (p. iii). The following tips do not purport to provide all of the answers about writing a good syllabus, but they should serve as a guide in creating a clear and effective document.

1. **An effective service-learning syllabus includes a clear definition of service-learning.** Students often confuse service-learning and volunteerism or do not understand how academics are tied to the experience. A crisp one-sentence explanation should be front and center in describing the course content. Here is an example from a Brevard Community College course on Fundamentals of Speech Communication, taught by Dr. Nancy Arnett: "Service-learning is a method by which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that enhance what is taught at the college by extending student learning beyond the classroom." It is useful to include concrete examples that relate to your specific course.

2. **An effective service-learning syllabus explains how the service experience is relevant to the curriculum and to the goals of civic engagement.** The instructor should

convey to students what components of the course the service experience will reinforce or enhance. Here is one example from a history course: "History is not just about 'old dead white guys,' or a list of dates floating in space. It is about ordinary people who, through the course of living their lives, made history. What better way, then, to learn history than to live it through service to the community in which one lives?"

**3. An effective service-learning syllabus describes the role of the center for service-learning (if applicable).** The syllabus should include the physical location of the office and the services it provides. If the center is well-equipped and the requirements are explained in the syllabus, it should be possible to tell students to "take this syllabus, go to the center, and tell them you want to do service-learning." Depending on the center's capabilities, students may need no further instruction to get started.

**4. An effective service-learning syllabus clearly explains the student placement process.** Students should be told where to go to initiate the process, what sites are appropriate and available, and how to make initial contact with the placement site. A service-learning center that is fairly advanced can inform students of the choice of sites available for that class. If you are working on your own, you'll need to provide students with a list of suitable agencies or service projects. In either case there should be some direction in the syllabus as to what steps the student should take in the short term.

**5. An effective service-learning syllabus specifies the time commitment involved for the student.** This includes not only the minimum required hours at the service site but also the time required to complete related activities such as seminars, reports, or class presentations. You may also want to include a disclaimer about travel time, required training, background checks, or fingerprinting, if those items apply.

**6. An effective service-learning syllabus delineates deadlines and due dates for placement, completion of required hours, and submission of related assignments.** Because the service is part of the course, these deadlines should be included in the comprehensive class calendar—the same document that lists due dates for papers, projects, and exams. Some instructors include an additional hand-out that fully explains the service-learning component. It is important that students have this at the beginning of the course.

> ## Learning by Example
>
> When seeking to create a service-learning syllabus, one of the best places to start is to find examples of what others have done. Try asking colleagues what has worked for them. Many print and online resources also offer examples, including Campus Compact's searchable online database of service-learning syllabi, available at www.compact.org/syllabi.

**7. An effective service-learning syllabus explains what service site and/or college documentation is required for successful completion of the service component.** Ideally, all parties—the agency or project supervisor, the student, the faculty member, and the service-learning center, should have copies of all required forms. In some

cases these forms come from the center; in others the faculty member provides them. Either way, plan to have replacements on hand for copies that get lost.

**8. An effective service-learning syllabus specifies how the student's experience will be evaluated.** Students should understand how the experience is factored into his or her class grade: as extra credit, in lieu of another assignment, as a required assignment, etc. If the points are variable (e.g., "up to 5 points of extra credit may be assigned"), students should know the criteria for assignment of points.

**9. An effective service-learning syllabus explains how to address problems that may arise with the placement.** Potential problems may include student dissatisfaction with the placement site, scheduling conflicts, personal conflicts, unmet expectations, interruptions in the service commitment, or delays in the placement process, among other challenges. If there is no center for service-learning at the college, the faculty member should be prepared to handle these problems.

**10. An effective service-learning syllabus includes a reflection component with clear and specific goals, which may include intellectual, civic, ethical, cross-cultural, career-related, or other goals.** Will this reflection happen within the class, outside of class, online, or in some other forum? Some of the many options for reflection include a written journal, essay, or research paper; a multimedia presentation; a one-on-one seminar; a group discussion; or a play, film, or music production. The ways that students can express what they have learned are unlimited; the key is to identify and structure these methods to guide students in expressing themselves.

With these structures and processes in place, you should be well prepared to offer students a service-learning program that will enhance their college experience in multiple ways.

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