

Service-Learning Programs Contextual Statement

Service-learning enables colleges and universities to meet their goals for student learning and development while making unique contributions to addressing community, national, and global needs.

Both college students and the communities they serve stand to reap substantial benefits from engaging in service-learning. Among frequently cited benefits to student participants are developing the habit of critical reflection; deepening comprehension of course content; integrating theory with practice; increasing understanding of the issues underlying social problems; strengthening sense of social responsibility; enhancing cognitive, personal, and spiritual development; heightening understanding of human difference and commonality; and sharpening abilities to solve problems creatively and to work collaboratively.

Community benefits include new energy and assistance to broaden delivery of existing services or to begin new ones; fresh approaches to solving problems; access to resources; and opportunities to participate in teaching and learning. Through improved town-gown relationships, colleges and universities also gain additional new learning settings for students and new opportunities for faculty to orient research and teaching to meet human and community needs.

For the purpose of the *CAS Standards for Service-Learning Programs*, service-learning is defined as follows: “Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.” The hyphen in service-learning is critical in that it symbolizes the

symbiotic relationship between the service and the learning. The term community in the definition of service-learning refers to local neighborhoods, the state, the nation, and the world community. Service-learning enables all participants to define their needs and interests (B. Jacoby, *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, 1996).

Reflection and reciprocity are fundamental concepts of service-learning. As a form of experiential education, service-learning is based on the pedagogical principle that learning and development do not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself. Rather, they occur as a result of reflection intentionally designed to foster learning and development. Service-learning programs emphasize various types of learning goals, including intellectual, civic, ethical, moral, cross-cultural, and spiritual. Programs may highlight different combinations of these goals. Service-learning programs are also explicitly structured to promote learning about the larger social issues behind the needs to which the service is responding. This learning includes a deeper understanding of the historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political contexts of the needs or issues being addressed. Reflection can take many forms: individual and group, oral and written, directly related to discipline-based course material or not.

The other essential concept of service-learning is reciprocity between the server and the person or group being served. Service-learning avoids placing students into community settings based solely on desired student-learning outcomes and providing services that do not meet actual needs or perpetuate a state of need rather than seeking and addressing the causes of need. Through reciprocity, students develop a greater sense of belonging and responsibility as members of a larger community.

Service-learning thus stands in contrast to the traditional, one-way approach to service in which one person or group has resources that they share with a person or group that they assume lacks resources. Reciprocity also eschews the concept of service that is based on the idea that a more competent person comes to the aid of a less competent person. Service-learning encourages students to do things *with* others rather than *for* them. Everyone should expect to learn and change in the process.

Although service-learning that is embedded in the curriculum provides opportunities for faculty to enhance students' learning by integrating course content with practical experience in a structured manner intended to meet course objectives, powerful opportunities for student learning and development also occur outside the classroom. Student affairs professionals can and do involve students in co-curricular service-learning programs that contribute to their learning and development. Although service-learning that is connected to faculty research and community involvement can lead to more broad-based and long-term community enhancement, shorter-term service projects also make considerable contributions to communities in both direct and indirect ways. Even one-time experiences that address community needs and that are designed to achieve specific student learning and development outcomes can appropriately be called service-learning.

References and Resources

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