



Constructing a Service-Learning Syllabus

The following is a list of concerns to address when articulating a service-learning experience in your course syllabus. Please note that this is **not** a discussion of how to integrate service-learning and community-based work into a specific curriculum or discipline. This document simply presents a list of items your syllabus should include in order to clearly present a well-structured assignment to students.

These items can be in the actual syllabus or, if necessary or preferred, in a supplemental memorandum. If the discussion of service-learning does appear in an addendum to the actual syllabus, the syllabus should still reference service-learning and refer students to the supplemental document(s).

Best Practices for Service-Learning Syllabi

Frame the experience

- The syllabus needs to **indicate service-learning early on and often**. Make service-learning an integral part of the syllabus, weaving discussions of service work, course learning objectives, reflection assignments and community partnerships throughout the document.
- “SL” or “Service-Learning” should appear in the **course title**, even if parenthetical.
- Mention that this is a service-learning course in the **course description**, or very early on in the document.
- Include a **definition of service-learning**. The American Association of Community Colleges offers a concise definition: “Service learning combines community service with academic instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and personal and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in activities that address community-identified needs, while developing their academic skills and commitment to their community.”
- Include a discussion of **civic responsibility** and why life-long learning is important. This discussion can revolve around your specific discipline or be a general discussion about participation in a healthy democracy.
- Discuss which **course objectives** students will address through their service work in the community. This requires that community needs are identified and then linked to appropriate course objectives. The syllabus should explicitly tell students how the assigned service work meets course learning objectives and fulfills a need in the community.
- State the **number of service hours required** of each student. Always delineate direct service hours, or contact hours with the community partner, versus time spent working on reflection and other service-learning assignments. Another model is to **require completion of a certain product** for the community partner, irrespective of the time it takes to complete. Consider which option is best for your course, students and community partners.
- **Carefully consider adjusting the workload of students**. It is crucial that service work and related assignments are not an add-on to existing course work, but rather, in place of existing course work. Identify assignments that can be replaced or re-focused. Consider fewer readings,

or at least make the readings more closely related to community issues and civic engagement. Replace papers with service-learning reflection journals and writing assignments. If there is a major research assignment in your course, consider integrating the community experience and oral interviews as a major primary source.

Critical Reflection Assignments

- **Students should not be given a grade for the service hours performed.** They are given a grade based on the learning that happens because of the service and therefore, the manifestation of that knowledge. In other words, the reflection assignments are the evaluative measure of a service-learning experience. Always remember, you do not grade the service, you grade the learning.
- Reflection assignments should be structured. When **reflection is guided by the instructor**, students connect their service work to course content more easily. Clearly define the methods of reflection and remember to use multiple reflective methods, respecting different student learning styles. Consider leading course discussions, creating journal prompts, paper topics, supplemental reading assignments and other methods that ask students to directly relate their service with course content.
- As with any academic assignment, **do not forget the logistics.** Include a list of due dates, formatting, and length requirements for each reflection assignment.
- **Determine the worth and weight of reflection assignments.** Tell students what percentage of their final grade will be represented by reflection assignments and the service-learning project. Remember that students make judgments about the value of an assignment based on its contribution to their final grade.

Community Partnerships

- Set a **due date** as to when the community partnerships must be formed and students must start working in the community.
- Consider **partnership agreement forms** that the student and a staff member at the community organization both sign and submit to you.
- **Involve your community partner(s) in the learning process.** They are co-educators in a service-learning context and should be treated respectfully. Invite them to participate in reflection discussions, group presentations, project orientation day at the beginning of the semester, as well as evaluation and assessment effort at the end of the course.
- **Educate students (and yourself) as to the realities of the non-profit world.** Non-profit personnel tend to be overworked and underpaid. Communication takes time and it's best to make frequent and early contact both by phone and by e-mail. Allow for a reasonable response time. Students and faculty should be flexible and respectful in understanding the needs and on-going projects of community partners. There are significant cultural differences between the community and higher academia and all parties should be aware of that.

If the instructor selects the community partner(s):

- Discuss how the selected partners **fit with course content.**
- Whether there is one community partner organization or several, include **contact, scheduling or location information** you discussed with the organization.
- **Resources to consider in a search for partnerships** are local United Way organizations, community volunteer centers that serve as a clearinghouse for such information, college/university service-learning centers and colleagues engaged in the pedagogy.

If students are required to create their own partnership(s):

- Ideally, faculty form partnerships and present those partnerships to students; however, if the task of students negotiating their own partnerships is **justified by the learning objectives** of the course, then clearly explain that to students.
- Guide students with statements regarding **the type of community organization** that will meet the learning objectives of your course. Many faculty require that students submit their selected partnership for approval by a certain date early on in the semester.
- **Always include instructions** as to how to locate a community partner organization.
- When contacting a community partner, **students should identify themselves as being from the college/university**, explain which service-learning course they're taking, who the professor is, how many hours they must serve, and then be prepared to enter negotiations related to schedules and the project on which they'll be working.

If service-learning is optional for students:

- Clearly explain that opting into a service-learning experience will **replace other course assignments**. In other words, service-learning cannot be in addition to all other course assignments, readings and exams; rather, it is a viable alternative.
- In order to entice students to opt into a service-learning experience, it should be presented as an **appealing alternative** to other course work. For instance: a 15-page term paper or 15 hours of service work and a reflection journal.
- **The best practices for integrating reflection assignments and community partnerships, discussed above, still apply.** The items discussed above need to be included when presenting the service-learning option and need to be required of students choosing the service-learning experience.

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Additional Service-Learning Resources

- American Association of Community Colleges: www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning
- Campus Compact: www.compact.org
- Corporation for National and Community Service: www.nationalservice.gov
- Learn and Serve America: www.learnandserve.gov
- National Service-Learning Clearinghouse: www.servicelearning.org
- National Service-Learning Exchange: www.nslexchange.org



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