

**Academic Service-Learning:**  
**A Handbook for Faculty**  
**Mini-Edition**

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4<sup>th</sup> Edition.  
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Published and printed with support from  
Dean of Teaching and Learning, Karen Wilson and  
The Office of Cooperative Education and Experiential Learning  
The complete version of this handbook can be found on  
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# **I. Overview and Need for Academic Service-Learning**

## **Introduction**

Across the nation, growing numbers of higher education students are involved in some form of service-learning. A recent study conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges demonstrated that nearly half of all community colleges use service-learning to connect students, communities, and institutions (Robinson, 2003). Current research suggests an increased enthusiasm and participation rate for college students at all types of colleges and universities. (Learn and Serve America, 2008). Service-learning at a community college provides a way to make the institutional mission come alive on campus and in the community. This condensed handbook addresses teaching and learning issues raised by faculty regarding service-learning, including: (1) what academic service-learning is, (2) what the benefits are, (3) what the principles of good practice are, and (4) how to go about implementing service-learning in academic classes.

## **What is Academic Service-Learning?**

The definition created and adopted by Delta College's Academic Service-Learning Advisory Board in 2008 is as follows:

*“Academic service-learning is a credit-bearing teaching/learning method that combines meaningful community service with critical, reflective thinking so that students gain greater application of course content and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.”*

Typically integrated into the student's curriculum, academic service-learning provides an opportunity for the student to help meet community needs and is connected to a formal learning experience that includes in-depth reflection by the student regarding what he/she has learned from the experience. The National Campus Compact Center for Community Colleges describes service-learning *as a teaching method which combines*

*community service and academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility.*

Academic service-learning falls midway between volunteerism and internships, with the provider and recipient of the service benefiting equally. *While the students serve, they learn.* In summary, the essential components of academic service-learning are:

- *meaningful service to the community*
- *a clear connection between course outcomes and service activities*
- *structured opportunities for students to use their service activities in synthesizing course content*

According to Jeffrey Howard, author of the *Service-Learning Course Design Workbook* (2001), there are three criteria necessary for determining whether or not a course may be considered appropriate for academic service-learning:

- **Relevant and Meaningful Service with the Community:** The service must be “*relevant to the community and to the content of the academic course, meaningful to the community and to the students, and developed and formulated with the community*” (p. 23).
- **Enhanced Academic Learning:** The service must provide an opportunity to apply, contrast, or complement learning resources while meeting a community need. “*Learning from the community is not automatic.*” (p. 26).
- **Purposeful Civic Learning:** the service must make an “*explicitly direct and purposeful contribution to the preparation of students for active civic participation*” (p. 38).

### **What Are the Benefits of Academic Service-Learning?**

Research clearly links academic service-learning to increased mastery of course outcomes and a heightened awareness of the importance of civic responsibility. According to an ongoing national study of colleges by the American Association of

Community Colleges, results show that 90 percent of students agreed that academically based service helped them see how course subject matter can be used in everyday life; 70 percent thought that service-learning helped them better understand required readings and lectures; and based on the critical reflection component, 97 percent had a clear understanding of the connection between service and learning (Robinson, 2003).

Minnesota Campus Compact, in their publication by AmeriCorps\*VISTA Dan Simonet, "Service-Learning and Academic Success: The Links to Retention Research," cites emerging research that validates how service-learning delivers greater student leadership development, enriched learning, and improved academic performance. Simonet further demonstrates that service-learning should be thought of as a *process* that leads to greater student *engagement*, thus resulting in the *product* of student retention.

Some additional benefits of academic service-learning are as follows:

- There is an increase in social responsibility among students who participate in service-learning (Kendrick, 1996).
- Students who participate in service-learning tend to score higher on measures of tolerance and appreciation of diversity and lower on measures of prejudice (Myers-Lipton, 1996).
- Participation in service-learning has been identified as an important contributor to students' engagement in and commitment to school (Sax and Astin, 1997).
- Service-learning use by faculty is most strongly motivated by increased understanding of course material, increased student personal development, increased student understanding that social problems are systemic, increased useful service in the community, and increased institution-community partnerships (Abes, Jackson and Jones, 2002).
- When service-learning projects are designed with the input of community partners, they meet real needs in the community.

In spite of the many benefits associated with service-learning, faculty members cite these factors as deterrents in the use of service-learning: anticipating logistical problems associated with coordinating the community service aspect of the course, not

knowing how to use service-learning effectively, not perceiving service-learning as relevant to the courses they teach, and not having released time to develop service-learning (Abes, Jackson and Jones, 2002). Although faculty involvement is commonly cited as most important for service-learning program sustainability, a study by the American Association of Community Colleges (Robinson, 2003) showed that faculty and administrative support were most important in making service-learning programs successful. Support structures identified as vital to integrating service-learning into the curriculum included faculty released time, stipends, professional development, and recognition.

## **II. Examples of Academic-Service Learning**

**Academic Service-Learning in Various Disciplines in Academic at Delta College** (also see Appendix A: Delta College Academic Service-Learning Faculty and Project and Appendix B: Delta College Service-Learning Assignments)

### **Business and Information Technology**

- Students in an editing class tutor local fourth and fifth grade elementary students through application of the writing process; a report (oral or written) is prepared by each student and shared with the class and guests at the end of the project.
- Students co-sponsor a fundraising community event with a non-profit agency by coordinating vendors, selling tickets, and marketing the event.
- Students assist low-income citizens with tax preparation.
- Students manage a second-hand store sponsored by a local non-profit agency.

### **English**

- Students tutor students and staff a volunteer-run “Writing Center” for the College.
- Developmental students research the life and history of a local lumber baron, write a play based on the life and times of the lumber baron, write a grant to acquire costumes, and perform the play for third graders at an elementary school.
- Students select causes and write persuasive letters to local papers/elected officials.

- Students interview local leaders and senior citizens regarding the historical events in their lives and write oral histories for publication.
- Students assist families at local women shelters in the community.
- Students provide tutoring and interaction to students with disabilities at an alternative high school.

### **Health and Wellness**

- Students have weekly companion relationships with homebound clients/patients.
- Students work with clients and professional staff of community agencies to identify, analyze, and help resolve health and wellness related problems; follow-up activities include presentations on specific health issues.
- Students coach after-school/community sports programs.
- Teams of students organize and participate in CROP Hunger Walks, American Cancer Society's "Relay for Life" as part of their program portfolio.
- Health/fitness students give presentations on health careers to local students.

### **Humanities**

- Computer design students create Web pages and designs for non-profit agencies.
- Broadcasting students provide videotaping and editing services for non-profit agencies and oral history projects.
- Broadcasting students produce a weekly show aired on the local PBS affiliate.
- Photography students take photographs for non-profit agencies and assist in creating photo displays and promotional materials.
- Art students sponsor an "Empty Bowls" fundraiser selling bowls they made to raise awareness of homelessness; proceeds are donated to the local soup kitchen.
- Students in philosophy courses combine community service with course readings, resulting in a code of ethics for an organization.
- Communication students tutor students in listening and speaking skills.

- Oral Communication for Managers students give presentations to the local Rotary Clubs, Red Cross, and homeless shelters, based on research, food drives, and other service projects.
- Speech students deliver storytelling presentations to the elementary students.
- Interpersonal communication students spend half a day at a soup kitchen helping the staff and residents prepare for their community-wide Thanksgiving dinner. The students work in groups at the site and later write reflective papers linking their communication experiences to course concepts.
- Automotive service technician students in a communication class teach alternative high school students how to buy and maintain a used car.
- Interpersonal communication students sponsor a campus-wide “Poster Display” event featuring what they learned in the course.

### **Math and Computer Science**

- Math students tutor math concepts for middle school students and at a juvenile center.
- Computer science students design Web pages and e-commerce sites for non-profit agencies, set up voicemail systems, build computer systems, and organize a computer tutoring volunteer program at an elementary school.
- Statistics students conduct community research polling, summarize the results, and publish their findings in a local newspaper.

### **Science**

- Microbiology students scientifically collect and test water samples, document, graph, and permanently record the data on a computer disk, and share their findings with the community.
- Biology students conduct studies focusing on global warming and the greenhouse effect, water pollution, plant and tree diversity, and the migratory patterns of birds based on visits to a water reclamation site.
- Environmental science students conduct an environmental site assessment for a local nature center and an environmental audit/review (ISO 14000 Environmental

Management System Audit) for local businesses; students write follow-up reports and make oral presentations upon completion of the projects.

- Environmental science students assist various professional environmental organization activities such as regional meetings, annual events, and state/county stream remediation.
- Students assist agencies in starting up recycling programs and develop tailored proposals for sustainability in agencies.
- Students provide assistance to the inventory, organization and operation of the Multimedia Learning Laboratory which is a facility available to all anatomy/physiology students, nursing students and allied health clinical program students, providing learning resources and spaces for student learning outside of class time.

### **Social Science**

- History students interview and collect documents from longtime community residents who were active during a specific historical era or decade. The students prepare and publish the materials for the local historical society and/or deliver informative presentations.
- Sociology students conduct field observations in human service agencies, record their observations in field journals, and describe their observations in term papers.
- Psychology and child development students participate in community-based mentor programs, keep a log of their interactions and activities, and write or present a final report related to child/adolescent developmental stages.
- Political science students work for political candidates or consumer advocacy groups to influence change and learn the political change process, participate in civic activism at local meetings and with public officials, and volunteer at organizations that deal with issues such as at-risk youth, homeless/joblessness and the environment. Journal-keeping and a final portfolio are required.
- Political science students teach basic government concepts to local elementary students and at alternative high schools.

- Criminal justice students establish a reading club with residents of a community corrections program to read, discuss, and debate various short stories.

### **Technical, Trades and Manufacturing**

- Construction management students partner with Habitat for Humanity to construct a home for a needy family in the community.
- Construction students work with local organizations to restore local historic buildings in need of repair and proper restoration.
- Construction students build “Peace Poles” for Delta College and sister institutions in Kenya

## **III. Developing, Implementing and Assessing Academic Service-Learning**

**How to Develop Service-Learning in Academic Courses** (also see Appendix D: A Course-Based Model for the Development of Academic Service-Learning)

A good place to start is to review the course design and syllabus, identify the learning objectives most suited to service-learning, and then ask: *“What is it my students could do in the community that relates to the objectives of this course?”* The faculty member *must* determine the best fit of service based on the learning objectives. The degree of importance of the competency may dictate the type or amount of service time required of the student, but the amount of time required is secondary to the *learning* that the faculty member seeks. Important questions and considerations include:

- **What specific learning objectives of this course are best suited for service-learning? What skills should students acquire upon completion?** General education/course-specific outcomes.
- **What kinds of competencies are best learned in service-learning settings?** Competencies best learned via active learning approaches.
- **What kinds of service placements and projects would benefit the community *and* facilitate meeting some of the learning objectives of**

**this course?** What kinds of community agencies/opportunities are available for placements? **Opportunities can be accessed at <https://www.1-800-volunteer.org/1800Vol/UWSC/vcindex.do>**

- **What is the best format for the service-learning component?** Elective/mandatory; short/long-term; extra credit/honors option/extra hour; individual, team or class project.
- **What kinds of learning can the service experience facilitate that is currently covered/demonstrated in other ways?** Reading; fewer tests.
- **What learning strategies or assignments help students link their service and classroom-based work?** Journals, papers, presentations.
- **What types of assessment strategies match the importance of the service-learning objectives?**

Adding service-learning to a course requires clearly communicating to students the role of service in the course and how it connects to the course content. This will help them understand how what they are learning is directly applicable to their lives. The course syllabus should clearly define the precise role of service in achieving the course learning objectives and the nature of the service-learning assignment. Finally, the reflective or synthesis component of service-learning can tie together the why, what, and how so that both students and faculty can assess the impact of the service on learning.

### **Assignments and Assessment Strategies for Academic Service-Learning**

As in any course, the development of assignments and assessment strategies usually starts with determining *how* the student will meet the learning objectives (assignments) and *to what extent* (assessment) the student satisfactorily meets those objectives. Often, faculty will have to revamp existing assignments and develop new ones related to the service-learning experience in the course. Some sort of structured reflection is the primary process by which students think critically about their service-learning experiences (Zlotkowski, 2001). In doing so, students are able to relate their

community service experience to course content by articulating how their service clarifies, reinforces, or illustrates course concepts.

To a degree, faculty can revise some existing presentations, projects, papers or journals to become a form of structured reflection and synthesis for service-learning. The assignment and assessment practice should match the degree of importance of the learning objective. For example, if service-learning is a small component of the course and related to a minor competency, then the academic product, or assignment, should produce a minor impact on the student's overall grade; however, if the service component is tied to a major competency, then the teaching strategy to facilitate this learning should involve a significant academic product which produces a major impact on the grade.

The National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group produced *A Field Guide for Teachers* in collaboration with the Vermont Department of Education (1999). The study concluded that to better understand how service affects student learning, teachers need not only to evaluate the overall quality of student work (summative assessment) but also provide students with ongoing feedback (formative assessment) on their performance and on areas of possible improvement. *“Study group members came to the conclusion that assessing what students learn through service is not really different from assessing any other learning experience . . . The one major distinction for service learning, like other experiential learning opportunities, is that much of the evidence of student learning is demonstrated in the act of performing the service itself . . .service-learning can be the way students both learn and demonstrate their learning. As students perform their service, they produce evidence of learning . . . One challenge with service-learning is that some demonstrations of learning occur “in the field” and may therefore be harder to capture. . . observation is a great source of evidence, but if undocumented, much of this evidence can slip away. Journal entries, peer evaluations, and group discussions can all serve to help document this learning. Ultimately, service-learning might be one of the best means for assessing student learning . . . Generated in a real world context, this evidence can serve as a truly authentic assessment of what students know and can do (pp. 2-7,# 8).*

Common types of assignments and assessment strategies for service-learning include:

- Student journals
- Surveys
- Synthesis/reflective papers
- Individual interviews
- Group projects
- Group discussions/electronic discussions
- Portfolios (including observations by agency representatives, work logs, times sheets, journals, letters, charts, audio or video clips)
- Presentations (in class, community, agency)
- Case study/history/ethnography
- Products for agency
- Research paper including synthesis
- Creative writing/presentation pieces

### **Reflection and Assessment Strategies**

Since an essential element of service-learning is reflection, in which students are asked to integrate their service knowledge into the content and theory of the course, a journal/reflective paper can help students develop critical thinking skills about their service work and how it relates to their mastery of subject matter. Questions to ask are:

- Prior to the project: Why this project? What do you expect out of this project? What do you know about this topic/group/agency? What do you expect to learn or gain and what do you expect to give back? What concerns do you have?
- During the project: What do you see? What do you do? How do you feel? What are your concerns? How can you improve? What are you doing well? What skills are you developing or applying? What is uncomfortable? What are you learning that you can relate to the concepts of the course? How is this experience

challenging your stereotypes/prejudices? How is it significant in your community/society?

- After the project: What have you learned? What difference have you made? What was most difficult? Satisfying? Surprising? How can you apply what you've learned? Where? What do you see as your most valuable contribution to the project? What attitudes or expectations, if any, have changed on your part? How can you tie what you're learning into learning outcomes for this course? You major? Work? How has this experience reinforced what you're learning in class? Has learning through experience taught me more, less, or the same as in class? In what ways?

Some additional sample reflective questions include:

1. What are you learning about yourself?
2. How would you change your service-learning experience if you could?
3. Give an example of something you learned that relates to the concepts of topics covered in class?
4. Describe a person, situation or experience you find interesting/challenging to be with at your service-learning site.
5. What has happened that makes you feel you might or might not like this work as a career?
6. Describe the most important thing you are learning (or that happened) and how can you use it in other situations.

Remind students to take a few minutes at the end of their service-learning time to write, suggesting they write their thoughts freely and edit later. Give them concrete examples of sincere writing and of good use of perceptual skills. Ask students to share some of their reflections by reading excerpts aloud in class. Give feedback freely.

**Group discussions** can serve as an indicator of how students are doing and help students synthesize knowledge, compare their experiences with others in class, and critically review issues related to their service-learning. Although group discussions are by nature an imprecise mode of evaluation, they may provide important assessment data for the instructor to use to improve student learning in the future. Some ways to use group discussion include the following:

- Schedule regular sessions in which students come to class prepared to discuss their service-learning projects (“Pair and Share” sessions in which students work in pairs to discuss progress, listen, ask questions, etc.).
- Use a discussion topic (poverty, homelessness, citizenship) and hold class discussions asking students to relate their service projects to the topic.
- Ask students to write their questions/journal entries about their service and bring to class; use to guide discussion as a class or in small groups.
- Guide the class through a focus group, using specific questions you create to assess learning or to make adjustments to the service-learning projects.

**Feedback from service sites** can provide useful information that becomes part of the comprehensive evaluation of a student service-learning project. Some agencies supply forms that can be used as part of a service-learning contract with the agency, or generic forms can be obtained from the Delta’s Volunteer/Service Learning Office.

## **Summary**

Service-learning is about learning. Listen to what some students had to say about what they learned during their service-learning projects:

*“My life has been changed just from that one experience. It has made me study harder and work harder at what I do.”*

*“Even if it was in the tiniest of ways I believe what we did was significant.”*

*“I went into this experience with a self-imposed prophecy. I entered the mission determined to learn something and help others. I knew this was going to be a great experience for me and the class to interact with another type of culture. What I learned about interpersonal communication through this experience was the importance of open-mindedness. Because without an open-minded attitude a communicator will have trouble interacting competently with people from different backgrounds. I know everyone has different prejudices and stereotypes about the homeless, like they’re lazy or uneducated or smell bad. It’s important that people overcome these pre-existing stereotypes and learn to appreciate and interact with people from different backgrounds as individuals. This experience taught me a lot about life.”*

### **References and Recommended Web Sites**

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### **Helpful Websites**

American Association for Higher Education's Best Practices for Service-Learning

<http://www.aahe.org/service/models.htm>

American Association of Community Colleges Horizons Service-Learning Project

<http://aacc.nche.edu/initatives/horizons/syllabi.htm>

Campus Compact Syllabi Project <http://www.compact.org/syllabi>

Campus Compact <http://www.compact.org> and Michigan Campus Compact

Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges

<http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/services/servicelearning/>

Legal Issues for Service-Learning Programs [www.nonprofitrisk.org](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org)

<http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/servicelearning/frisk.htm>

*Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* <http://www.umich.edu/~mjcs/>

National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) <http://www.nsee.org>

Minnesota Campus Compact <http://www.mncampuscompact.org>

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (online syllabi)

<http://www.servicelearning.org/>

National Service-Learning Cooperative (K-16) Clearinghouse

<http://www.nicsle.coled.umn.edu/>

SERVEWEB <http://www.ostberg.org/serveweb/>

Service-Learning Home Page <http://www.csf.Colorado.edu/s/>

Volunteer Centers of Michigan <http://www.mivolunteers.org>

1-800-Volunteer.org <http://www.1-800-volunteer.org/1800Vol/UWSC/vcindex.do>