

Service-learning in social work education

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GUIDE
for community partners

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Content

Service-learning definition

Service-learning characteristics

Types of involvement in service-learning

Difference between Service-learning and Other Forms of Community Involvement

What are the steps in service-learning

Benefits of Service-learning Projects

Community Partners Role in Service-learning

Sample Community Partner Asset Survey

Planning of the service-learning course with the community partner

Questionnaires for community partners involved in service-learning projects

Sample of Reflection Exercise for Community Partners



Service-learning definition

Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that brings together planned learning and community service. It is learning by doing good for others.

Service-learning focuses on both an activity that is beneficial to the community (for example tutoring children whose families are having difficulties paying for tutors) and the educational benefits that result from it for the person undertaking the activity (what did you learn in the process of tutoring the children, but also what did you learn before the activity, what did you learn about planning a small service-learning project).

Service-learning characteristics

The pillars of SL are built on collaboration between the students, schools, and communities. Regardless of the number of definitions of SL, several key components have been identified in the literature:

- It is a pre-planned and organised student experience, gained through a **service that responds to the authentic needs of the community**. SL supports a change in the traditional assistive model (service for the community) to a horizontal model of solidarity (service with the community).
- It is based on **active student involvement** in all stages of SL project, from planning to assessment. Students should feel ownership of the SL project and act as leaders of activities, not only as implementers.
- SL experience is **intentionally integrated into the academic curriculum or into the research context**. There is a clear connection of service to the objectives and content of education.
- It provides a temporal sequence that allows participants **to reflect** on the SL experience. Reflection in SL is seen as a meaning-building process that guides the learner through the community-oriented experiences, facilitating the in-depth understanding of relationships and the connections between experiences and the SL concepts.
- It aims to develop **civic responsibility in students**. From application of this strategy in the process of education we expect not only the development of professional competences but also changes in the students' "civic characteristics," which determine their involvement as citizens not only during but also after performing service-learning projects. (Albanesi, Culcasi & Zunszain, 2020).

Service-learning is understood as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with education and reflection. The community service can be incorporated into the curriculum of various academic subjects and study programs. There are several SL models in practice. It can be implemented within one subject, or it can combine several subjects or teachers to solve interdisciplinary projects. Subjects in which the strategy is applied may also be selective. Service-learning allows students to earn credits for the learning outcomes that take place through active community engagement and real-life solutions in practice. The process of learning is supported by self-reflection as a necessary part of experimental learning. The teacher plays the role of a tutor or mentor in this process.

Types of involvement in service-learning

Direct Service

Direct service activities are those that require personal contact with people in need. This type of service is generally the most rewarding for students because they receive immediate positive feedback during the process of helping others.



Indirect Service

Indirect service activities are centred in channelling resources to the problem rather than working directly with an individual who may need the service. Often students do not meet the people they serve. Indirect service might take the form of fundraising or collections.



Advocacy

Advocacy involves planning, conducting, and/or creating awareness initiatives and events to address a community issue or need. It can be for example bringing in a guest speaker and discussion on a topic of interest in a community or working with elected officials to draft legislation to improve communities.



Community-Based Research

Community-based research (CBR) can be defined as a partnership of students, faculty and community partners who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or affecting social change. Typical CBR projects include faculty, students and community partners working together Indirect Service

Difference between Service-learning and Other Forms of Community Involvement

Service-learning, volunteering and internship can be seen as very similar concepts, both comprising of some kind of unpaid engagement and learning, but there are differences between them.

Service-learning

is a pedagogical approach that brings together planned learning and community service. Service-learning is **linked to academic learning** - curriculum requirements at different subjects in school, based on the formal education standards. Service-learning is the process in which young people contribute in their community to solving real issues and needs (the service part), but they are doing this while learning very specific elements and acquiring concrete and pre-planned skills and knowledge (the learning part). This turns service-learning into a complex approach to learning for students that does not aim to deliver learning processes in a dry manner, but to instruct using learning by doing and, more than that, learning by doing good for others.

Volunteering

is an action or activity performed by individuals (alone or in groups), providing service or offering help to others, or for a specific community, without any payment, for the general public benefit and based on their free choice to become involved. Volunteering can happen in planned contexts or it can be informal, as a spontaneous action coming from people who see others in need and decide to act. However, for the purpose of the present manual, we refer to planned or formal volunteering, which takes place based on the intention of organisations or public institutions to create volunteering opportunities for citizens as a means of them actively participating in society.

Professional practice/internship

Is a learning period in which students or trainees acquire specific knowledge and skills related to their field of study or work. Professional practice is a part of a study program in university (sometimes also in secondary schools), in which students will have a practical study period, usually outside the classroom, interacting with real actors in the community, and on the job market, where they can put in practice the theoretical learning they acquired in school on a certain subject. This professional practice is thus part of the study program, it is often mandatory, has clear learning objectives connected to the academic curriculum and will be evaluated by teachers. Even though it may take place in the community and for the benefit of people in need, or for social causes, the intention to become involved in it is related to the student's need to learn and acquire practical skills, and not to the intention of serving others, as in the case of volunteering.

Table 1: Comparison of service-learning, volunteering, and professional practice

Service-learning	Volunteering	Internship / professional practice
<p>young people contribute in their community to solving real issues and needs (the service part), but they are doing this while acquiring concrete and pre-planned skills, knowledge, and competencies (the learning part) based on free choice to become involved</p>	<p>action or activity performed by individuals (alone or in groups) for other people, the community, and the common good</p> <p>based on free choice to become involved unpaid activity</p> <p>learning occurs, but it's usually not pre-planned or reflected upon</p>	<p>practical study and learning period in which students or trainees acquire specific knowledge and skills related to their field of study or work</p> <p>often mandatory</p> <p>has clear learning objectives connected to the academic curriculum and will be evaluated by teachers or a person in the field</p> <p>the intention to get involved is related to the student's need to learn and acquire knowledge and skills and not to serve others</p>
unpaid activity		
learning by doing good for others		

Source: Brozmanová Gregorová, A. et al., 2022.

What are the steps in service-learning



The service-learning process consists of 4 main steps linked by reflection, communication, promotion and monitoring.



Planning and preparation

The starting point is to identify a need or problem of the local community which the project will address. At this stage the objectives for learning and service should be also defined. Depending on what kind of project the group is going to implement, they have to be planned slightly differently, but the planning will always involve: the definition of tasks and their distribution, communication in the group, preparation of the project schedule, and budget planning. The participants may also need to receive some extra training in specific issues – to gain specific knowledge or develop certain skills.

Implementation

The next step is the actual activity students have prepared for. A longer commitment is advisable, as service-learning projects should be sustainable in the long-term. When the activity is recurrent, there will also be time to reflect on it between individual events, discuss the learning process and emerging difficulties, look for solutions and introduce any modifications.



Evaluation

Once students have completed the activity, it is necessary to discuss it, summarize it, draw conclusions for the future, and analyse the service and the learning process in the context of the whole group and each participant.



Celebration and closure

This is a very important stage, which, unfortunately, is sometimes forgotten. Make sure you plan a final meeting or trip that will conclude the whole process, and give you the opportunity to show and appreciate your participants' achievements. Let young people take pride in what they have done!

Reflection

Reflection is considered a key "ingredient" that transforms experience from SL activity into learning, it has a vital role in awareness-building and transforms service-learning into critical pedagogy, with a potential to determine personal transformation and social change (Jacoby, 2015).



Communication and promotion

Communication is a continuous process among the participants in the project, with the institution, with community partners, and with the community. An optimal service-learning project involves creating effective communication channels between the participants in the project and between participants and the community. (Regina, Ferrara 2017).

Monitoring

Maintaining ongoing monitoring of the project is an often overlooked aspect of a quality service-learning experience. Monitoring the learning and actions taken throughout the project, as opposed to after the project is completed, provides valuable information for the reflection processes, for evaluation and for the promotion of the project.



Benefits of Service-learning Projects

Benefits for Community Partners

- Student participation provides useful service;
- Enhanced organizational capacity to achieve mission;
- Organizations expose students to their mission and purpose, possibly creating a lasting interest in volunteering with the organization;
- Enhanced relationship with the university;
- Contributing to solving problems that exist in practice;
- Conducting and maintaining contact with university, faculty, teachers and students for potential future cooperation;
- Getting to know the students who work on specific tasks as potential employees;
- Keeping a realistic update on new knowledge and skills that students possess;
- Development of a democracy of participation;
- A more resilient community with better and quicker response to different issues.



Benefits for students

- Understanding, learning and mastering the theoretical part of the course in relation to real life problems and situations;
- Enabling the ability to develop managing skills in unpredictable situations;
- Enabling the self-reflection of individual predispositions for a potential career and the necessary competences for decisions related to career choice;
- Recognizing the relevance of theoretical knowledge in the future workplace;
- Developing competences that students can further use at the workplace, such as leadership skills and communication;
- Enabling development of creativity;
- Expanding the social contacts network - getting to know potential employers, associates, partners, clients;
- Developing a sense of responsibility within the relationship with the community partners;
- Experiencing different ways of dealing with stress, frustration, failure, conflicts, misunderstandings, misinterpretations etc.;
- Getting insights into the complexity of professional reality that is often difficult to teach in classes or describe in case studies;
- Offering the possibility of testing the students' motivation for choosing their future career;
- Making students aware of coordination of team members, community responsibility, deadlines, commitments and completion of planned commitments in accordance with agreed criteria;
- Developing the need for proactive and responsible action in society;
- Developing a sense of social responsibility, social sensitivity for the needs of the local community, with special emphasis on marginalized social groups;
- Developing the communication with different social groups and the acceptance of diversity.

The framework for accreditation of social work education programs introduced by the Council on Social Work Education emphasizes the responsibility of accredited social work programs to educate for nine specific professional competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). It states that that overall professional social work competence is multi-dimensional and consists of nine interrelated competencies that are comprised of knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes. These are the following competencies:



- Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behaviour
- Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice
- Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice
- Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-informed Practice
- Engage in Policy Practice
- Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
- Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
- Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
- Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities.

Competency-based education is an outcome-oriented approach to curriculum design and it ensures that students can demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice. Thanks to service-learning projects student develop above mentioned competencies. Service-learning projects empower students to work on social problems within their communities and inspire student confidences in the process of change.



Benefits for academic staff

- Increasing the quality and relevance of teaching content;
- Increasing the creativity and the interactivity of the teaching process;
- Developing of innovative approaches to problem solving;
- Developing contacts with community partners;
- Providing closer relationship with students;
- Providing contexts for testing models, concepts and methodologies for solving specific cases of community organizations;
- Providing opportunities for linking different disciplines in understanding the purpose and achievement of their own teaching engagement;
- Raising the reputation of socially engaged teachers in the higher education community;
- Reducing the gap between theory and practice, both for students and for teachers themselves;
- Creating an empirical database of information as a basis for scientific research;
- Developing opportunities for publishing papers (in internationally recognized journals) about the experience of applying SL methodology in teaching for a wide range of scientific areas.

Benefits at the level of the Higher Education Institution

- Implementing of strategic initiatives and commitments contained in the HEI's operational strategy;
- Reducing the gap between the students' acquired competences after graduation and the competences required in the labour market;
- Empowering students with civic skills by joining them with the community;
- Promoting intergenerational and intercultural experiences of cooperation;
- Strengthening trust in the University as an institution with which is useful, wise and socially desirable to cooperate;
- Building the foundations for future partnerships with stakeholders in the (local) community, as well as developing innovative curricula according to the educational market;
- Increasing the level of learning satisfaction through SL-based activities by providing opportunities for meaningful experiences to the students



Community Partner's Role in Service-learning

The community partnership is a key piece of service-learning. Community partners identify the need and serve as the key contact for faculty and students. For students, the community partner often helps the students learn about themselves and the local neighbourhood. The community partner has the unique role of helping create a real-world experience for students. Thus, we ask that the community partner provide important guidance and opportunities to maximize the experience for the students as well as the community partner.

As a community partner you are truly a partner in the student's education and should view yourself as a **co-educator**.

Students who work with your organization through service-learning are usually doing their work in connection with a specific instructional goal for an academic course. All people in the service-learning loop – faculty, students and community partners – are considered teachers and learners. We assume that the students and your faculty partner will learn from you. Hopefully, it will also be a learning experience for you, as you collaborate with a faculty partner to provide an experience for students in the context of your organization and course.



The Engaged Community Partner

- Articulates their specific goals for collaboration
- Values student/faculty involvement in the work of the organization
- Understands the university's goals and capacity
- Prepares staff and beneficiaries for interactions with students
- Provides necessary support for students
- Communicates limitations and expectations clearly
- Participates in planning of activities
- Provides feedback and participates in assessment activities



Questions to Ask Yourself & Your Staff About Potential Service-Learning Projects

- How would a service-learning partnership meet the objectives and goals of my community agency?
- What types of service-learning experiences would be best for my organization?
- What types of courses would benefit from a partnership with my organization?
- What kinds of preparation would my organization need to participate in a service-learning partnership with faculty and students? How will I facilitate this preparation?
- How many students will it realistically require to complete the project?
- How many students can we handle at once?
- What staff members will supervise and coordinate student work?
- What resources will my organization need to support the student project completion?
- What level of skills and knowledge do the students need before working with my organization?
- What academic discipline seems to be a “best fit” for needs in our organization?
- How will the partnership enhance academic learning through service experiences?
- In what way will my organization assess the service-learning partnership?
- What criteria will we use?



WHAT ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A COMMUNITY PARTNER?



- Meeting with the students at an agreed upon time at a designated space within your organization to provide:
 - A brief overview of your organization.
 - A safety orientation highlighting any regulated safety requirements as well as any site-specific safety items that participants should be aware of.
 - Any additional training or orientation requirements that would enable students to effectively complete their assigned project(s) or task(s).
- Communicate with students about the expectations of the experience.
- Provide necessary guidance and resources to students who partner with your organization as they complete assigned projects or tasks (e.g., answer student questions, assist with troubleshooting, provide feedback and suggestions).
- Communicate any concerns about students' performance, safety, and project progression or any incidents (workplace accident, medical emergency, etc.) that occur during the placement with the designated person at university.
- Maintain regular communication with students and faculty member. Regular communication is key.
- Be aware of the learning outcomes of the course and take time to discuss with the student(s) how the work they are doing with your organization is linked to the learning outcomes.
- Recognize that the student has dedicated his/her time to your organization. Please discuss expectations with the students with this in mind, and adjust placement hours and project scope accordingly.
- Verify student documentation of hours completed.
- Provide feedback about the program.

Sample Community Partner Asset Survey[1]

Organization Name: _____ Date: _____
Organization Website: _____
Person completing this form: _____ Title: _____
Phone: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____
Organization Mission: _____

Check the type of volunteer opportunities that are available with your organization:
 One-time only Long-term only Both

Please check the populations that your agency serves:

- Youth
- Senior Citizens
- People with Disabilities
- Animals/Pets
- Families
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender
- Alcohol and Drugs
- Homeless
- Low Income
- Specific health condition: _____
- Specific Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Group: _____
- Other-----

Supervision: The supervisor is required to be available to the students (collectively) face-to-face at least one hour per week to provide teams and on occasion, individual team members, with guidance and support relevant to their work. Is the supervisor listed above prepared to provide this level of support?

- YES
- NO Please explain _____

Supervisor Information:

Name: _____
Title: _____
Years of Experience: _____
Past Supervisory Experience: _____
E-mail: _____ Direct Phone Number: _____

Best way for students to contact supervisor: e-mail phone both
Best time for students to contact supervisor

1
Source: Service-learning at Towson – A Guide for Community Partners. <https://www.towson.edu/provost/initiatives/faculty-center/teaching/servicelearning/documents/slcphandbook.pdf>

Project Criteria: Please rate your organization's ability to provide a project which meets the following criteria:

Project Criteria	4=Strongly Agree	3=Agree	2=Disagree	1=Strongly Disagree
Supervision: There is someone to provide consistent supervision and guidance to students for 1 hour per week.	4	3	2	1
Project Timeframe: The agency has a project that can be completed within the time frame of one semester.	4	3	2	1
Tangible and Concrete: The agency has a project that will lead to an identifiable and concrete product such as a handbook that is created or a fair or family/community event that is executed.	4	3	2	1
Support: The agency has the funds, staff, and resources necessary to support the project.	4	3	2	1
Relevance: The agency has a project relevant to the discipline and class.	4	3	2	1
Appropriateness: The agency has a project appropriate to the knowledge, skill, professionalism, and maturity of college students taking on their 1st service-learning experience.	4	3	2	1
Learning Value: The agency has a project that enables students to develop their professional skills and knowledge while providing service to the agency.	4	3	2	1
Student Time Commitment: The agency has a project that would allow students at least 15 hours of experience during the semester (50% onsite, 50% for projects relevant to research/assignments to develop and implement the project).	4	3	2	1

Are there any special requirements for students?

YES Please describe _____

NO

Questions: Please use the space below to list any questions or concerns you have.

Planning of the service-learning course with the community partner

- 1) What are your expectations in connection with the implementation of service-learning?
- 2) In what activities do you plan / could you involve students in service-learning?
- 3) What are your concerns regarding the implementation of service learning?
- 4) What benefits do you expect for your organization? How would a service-learning partnership meet the objectives and goals of your organization?
- 5) What kinds of preparation would your organization need to participate in a service-learning partnership with faculty and students?
- 6) How many students can you handle at once?
- 7) What staff members will supervise and coordinate student work?
- 8) What resources will your organization need to support the student project completion?
- 9) What level of skills and knowledge do the students need before working with my organization?

QUESTIONNAIRES FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS INVOLVED IN SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

1) Did you have any previous experience with SL before starting this SL project?

- a) yes
- b) no

2) Please rate how/clearly were the expectations of your organization discussed/communicated with the teacher(s) and students at the beginning of the SL project

- a) not clear at all
- b) clear enough
- c) very clear

3) Please rate whether the community needs/problems were properly/successfully addressed by the SL project

- a) not at all
- b) successfully enough
- c) (completely) successful

4) Please rate the appropriateness of the SL project time-frame/length:

- a) it was too short
- b) it was too long
- c) it was just right

5) Please rate the support offered by your organisation to the SL project/students (OR...please reflect upon your own support to SL project/students...)

- a) too less
- b) too much
- c) just right

Please explain your choice:

6) Please rate the support offered by the teacher(s) to your organisation in the context of the SL project (OR...please reflect upon the support offered by teacher(s) to your organisation...)

- a) too less
- b) too much
- c) just right

Please explain...

QUESTIONNAIRES FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS INVOLVED IN SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

7) Having in mind your experience on SL project, does your organisation have the interest to continue engagement in (similar) SL projects connected with the area of your service?

		yes	no	I don't know
	engagement with students			
	engagement with teacher(s)			
	engagement with faculty/university			

If YES, can you list some of the ideas/directions for collaboration (e.g. education, trainings, employment, research projects, students' volunteering etc.). . .

8) Was the **SL project manageable** in terms of the available resources in your organization?

	yes	no	I don't know
human resources (employers/volunteers)			
mentoring capacity of your organisation (employers/volunteers)			
Infrastructure			
time planning			
allocated budget			

9) Please list three **positive take-away aspects/points** of the collaboration within the SL project

- 1 -
- 2 -
- 3 -

10) Please list three **challenges/obstacles** that you have encountered and would like to address in future SL projects

- 1 -
- 2 -
- 3 -

11) What kind of **additional support would your organisation need** to keep collaborating in SL projects? (e.g. educational trainings on SL, additional financial resources, matchmaking services for finding partners at the university level, support for creating organisational policies etc.)

12) Would you **recommend SL projects to other community organisations?**

- a) YES, PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY
- b) NO, PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY

Sample of Reflection Exercise for Community Partners

For each question, write the emotion / feeling that the answer evokes in you (there can be more than one). Discuss your answers to the questions.

Alternative: Write one word, an idea for each question, or assign (draw) a picture that describes your answer to the question and use them to discuss your answers to the questions with others.

Example questions:

How do you evaluate cooperation and communication with academia?

How do you evaluate the contribution of the implemented project in meeting the needs of the organization?

What impact did the services provided by students have on the organization?

What impact did the services provided by students have on clients?

What did the students realize during the project?

How do you evaluate the innovativeness of the project implemented by the students?

How do you view the functioning of the organization after the implementation of the project by students?

What are your recommendations for students to implement service-learning projects?

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