Common Faculty Concerns

Remember…the Office of Civic Engagement & Service Learning is here to help as you develop and conduct your service-learning courses!

1. Academic Rigor

Is this another feel-good excuse to water down academic standards?

This is an important and legitimate concern for all that are concerned with quality higher education, and it is the focus of much of the past and current research on service learning. Unless real academic learning results, service learning has no place in our University. Academic credit should never be given for service, only for learning.

If applied properly, this pedagogy is actually more rigorous than traditional teaching strategies. Students are not only required to master the standard text and lecture material, but they must also integrate their service experience into that content. This is a high-level skill requiring effective reflection techniques designed to accomplish academic as well as practical outcomes. It is important to emphasize that incorporating service learning does not change what we teach, but how we teach it. With this change comes a new set of challenges for both the student and the teacher.

2. Competence in application of the strategy

Will I be able to successfully apply the strategy?

Trying anything new is a risk and it challenges our competencies. Most instructors report a steep learning curve with confidence developing fairly rapidly once the strategy is allowed to work. Relinquishing full control of the classroom is hard for many of us to do, but once we do, we find that students can and will play an active role in their learning if they are given the right structure. The path to becoming effective in using the service-learning strategy is not always clearly marked. We often find ourselves "making the road by walking." Fortunately, you are not alone on the road. There is considerable literature on the subject and many people right here at the CESL that can help you on your way. The guidelines presented in the "Ten Steps" section on page 11 should help you begin.
3. Students' ability to contribute meaningful service

How can I involve my underachieving or marginal students?

Many faculty are concerned that their students lack adequate preparation or skills to help others in a meaningful way. Our experience and the research literature suggests that this is not a problem; in fact, several authors cite impressive contributions made by previously underachieving students. Obviously we must use judgment in choosing appropriate placements and establishing levels of responsibility. The organizations must also orient and train our students to perform their specific service. When it comes to meeting the unexpected challenges we worry about, we find students will generally rise to the occasion. When faced with the challenges of service, students will often exert extra effort to be able to succeed at the task because meaning is attached to the project and they take ownership in it. This is the beauty of the pedagogy. It motivates students to attain higher levels of competence.

4. Time Constraints

How can I fit something new into an already cramped curriculum?

Service learning is not an add-on to your current course requirements. It does not change or add to what you teach; it only changes how you teach it.

Most of our students work in addition to their school attendance. How can they fit service into their already busy schedule?

Due to the variety and unique service-learning placement site options there are always opportunities and need for students.

5. Liability

What if something happens to my students or their actions result in damages to someone else?

There is an inherent risk in any out-of-classroom activity. All service-learning students should be fully informed about their placement and knowingly consent to undertaking any risk associated with that placement. In most cases, the organization providing the service-learning experience is responsible for the acts of students assigned to it and also assumes responsibility for the student. However, due care and judgment must always be exercised to assure that we do not place students in situations that might be risky or dangerous. We must also use any information or knowledge we have which might disqualify a student from engaging in certain activities to protect either the student or the public. Each student must sign a "FSU Waiver of Liability" form. This form reduces the risk to the university if the service-learning student puts herself/himself into a situation where injury or damages might occur.