Ten Steps to Developing Service Learning Activities

1. Use your imagination.

Consider the courses you teach and determine how service might be helpful in enriching learning in that discipline. Service learning can be effectively used in almost every academic discipline. Some applications require a little more imagination than others, and often the best are not immediately obvious. Brainstorm about the application potential for your course.

2. Connect course objectives to appropriate service-learning activities.

Call or visit the Office of Civic Engagement & Service Learning to discuss and identify placement sites that offer experiences relevant to your course. Then, based on your own experience and the help of our staff, you can choose the best opportunities to present to your students.

3. Make a list of learning goals.

What are you trying to accomplish for your students, yourself, and the community?

Review your course objectives to determine those that can be linked to service. Before going further, list two or three specific and measurable learning and service goals and objectives for your initiative. Be clear on your desired outcome at this point.

4. Decide the type and length of service-learning activity appropriate for your course.

Based upon your motives, goals, and objectives, choose a service-learning option. Decide how you will incorporate service learning into your course. Service options can range from a one-time special group project to a thirty-plus hour commitment to an organization.

5. Purposefully integrate service learning into course.

Once you have chosen how service learning will be incorporated, review and alter your course syllabus to reflect the incorporation of service learning. To be successfully integrated, the service-learning experience must be more than just an add-on to an already full syllabus. Identify some readings that tie the service to specific objectives. Allocate some class time for discussion of the experience. By consciously integrating service learning, up-front and in writing, you commit to the pedagogy.

6. Pitch it to the students.

When reviewing your syllabus with students, explain and promote the ideas behind including service learning in your class. Explain how the program benefits the student and the community. Make your commitment very clear and encourage them to take advantage of the opportunity for both the academic and personal growth that service learning affords.
7. **Link the service-learning experience with classroom learning.**

Develop specific learning and service objectives for students. Students must be guided in the development of these objectives so that they are clearly linked with the academic objectives of your course. Typically students will develop more affective goals (improve self-esteem, feel better about the community) or general non-course related goals (improve the community, learn about hospice care, learn how to build a house). In some cases you may wish to delay this step until after students have been oriented to their site placements so that they have some idea of what kinds of service they will be doing. In other cases, where you are familiar with the placement, you can have them do this prior to starting the service. Some faculty prescribe the learning and service objectives for the entire class. Establishing these student learning objectives up-front is a critical step in assuring the effectiveness of the service-learning in enriching student learning of course material. Clear learning objectives will allow students to see the link between learning and service.

8. **Give overviews, but don’t over-prepare.**

Teach students how to harvest the service-learning experience for knowledge. Experiential learning requires that we learn where we are. This may be the first time students have encountered experiential learning. With learning objectives in mind, students must be taught to focus on these objectives and related questions as they are performing service. One word of caution here: while we want our students prepared and oriented to service learning, we must be careful not to over-prepare them for their service-learning experience. We all enjoy the adventure of discovery and we can destroy that for our students by telling them exactly what to expect. Otherwise, the experience becomes a comparison instead of an adventure. Give them a good overview and set them free.

9. **Incorporate reflection before, during and after the service-learning experience.**

The practice of reflection is what connects the learning to the service. We cannot assume that learning will automatically result from the experience. Like us, our students may not learn from the service-learning activity. They may even learn the wrong thing or reinforce existing prejudices. Reflection helps prevent this from occurring.

Reflection can be in the form of journals, essays, class presentations, analytic papers, art work, drama, dialogue, or any other expressive act. The key to effectiveness is structure and direction. The nature and type of reflection determines its outcome. An unstructured personal journal or group discussion is a great way to elicit effective disclosure. Positive academic outcomes will result from structuring these exercises with specific course related questions.

Written reflection is a productive approach which helps improve basic communication skills. At the same time, it leads to critical thinking about the course objectives. It is the most common and the least intrusive in terms of taking up class time.
A more powerful, and in many ways more effective approach, is the purposeful dialogue or the reflective class session. This dialogue provides an opportunity for students to share experiences and exchange ideas and critical insights about the information being shared. To achieve academic outcomes, the dialogue—while spirited and free—should be bound by the learning objectives of the course. The faculty member must serve both as a facilitator to maintain the flow of ideas and a commentator who jumps on the relevant item and develops it into a teachable moment. When we seem to be losing control, the process can be threatening, but it is often at these critical moments that the real learning occurs. The real advantage of the reflective session is its power to develop a sense of community, which is one of the general goals of service-learning.

Whatever form of reflection is chosen, it is important to start it early in the experience to ensure students understand the process. It should then be followed up regularly to monitor their progress. This type of deliberate and guided reflection is what leads to academic learning, improved service, and personal development.

10. **Evaluate and grade students’ success.**

Evaluate the service-learning activity as you would any other project. Remember that students are being graded on the academic portion in the classroom, not their hours of service. Many of us feel uncertain when it comes to evaluating or assessing the outcomes of experiences we did not completely structure or present. By designing flexible measures you can use the same standard used in evaluating any other written or oral presentation: Did the student master the course material? This is the only way to assure academic integrity of the strategy. You may also wish to utilize formative and summative research techniques to measure your success in achieving your objectives. Formative assessment can be achieved through reading student journals with an eye toward answering your initial questions (Are they learning algebra? Is their writing more alive? Is the service-learning setting appropriate?).