

What Is Service Learning And Why Should We Use It?

Service learning is all about using your skills and drive to learn how to best help the community. But it's not just the community that benefits — students do too, as well as the university that assigns the service learning. Learn from us how to implement service learning, what the benefits are, what to include in the service learning unit and all about service learning assessments. What is service learning? It's much more than just volunteering for class: it's a way to learn and grow.

What Is Service Learning?

Service learning is all about [experiential learning](#) — that is, learning through experience, but by way of community service. Universities partner with local groups and organizations that are willing to have students as a part of their programs. The service is usually in line with what the student is learning, and that learning is incorporated into the classroom by way of assignments, discussions, and more.

Service Learning Differs From Traditional Education

Service learning is not your typical education, or your typical internship, and it's not work-study either. Service learning differs from other traditional types of experiential learning because it is service-based, but also fits the learning needs of the student. In this way, it works to further both the community and the student's education.

Service Learning In Action: What Does It Look Like?

Types Of Service Learning

Speaking broadly, there are two major types of service learning — co-curricular and academic.

[Co-curricular service learning](#) is when students engage in planned service activities that meet a community need. Students reflect on personal values and community needs as a result. An example would be if a business school decided to create a program for high-risk youth to explore their entrepreneurial side. Students from the business school would help with all aspects of the program voluntarily, from implementation to program design to outreach.

Academic service learning is course-specific and helps advance students' understanding of course content. Students reflect on the connection between their service and the curriculum, as well as needs and values. An example of this would be as part of an education course, a student works weekly on their own, at a local high-risk school as a teacher, facilitator, or other needed position.

Breakdown: How To Integrate Service Learning

What To Include In A Service Learning Unit

1. Pre-Reflection

Before beginning a service learning assignment or introduction to the unit, instructors should ask the students to reflect upon their own past experience with service work, their opinions on the community and their personal values, and how these may tie in to their education and career path.

2. Research

Either before or during the service learning, students should engage in research. This can be as simple as researching the area they will be service learning in or the organization they will be with. Or it can be as extensive as an entire research project based on the topic of their service learning.

3. Presentation

Students should become comfortable presenting their research findings and their experiences with their classmates.

4. Reflection

One of the most important aspects of service learning is reflection. Students engaged in service learning opportunities should reflect often on their experiences, how they relate to what they are learning in class, and how they relate to their own values and plans for their future.

Ideas for Including Service Learning into an Existing Course

1. Group Service Projects

This is where for one day or one period of time, an entire group completes a service project together. This can be done as part of a course or as a graduating class, or with an entire cohort.

2. Optional Within A Course

If service learning is optional within a course, students should be able to substitute service learning for other portions of the class.

3. Required Within A Course

This is a commonly used method, where all students are required to complete a service learning project on their own for the duration of the course.

4. Action Research Projects

Students can complete service learning and research as well. Students may choose to research a topic that might benefit the community, and then present it to a relevant organization.

5. Capstone Projects

Service learning is a great option for a capstone project. This allows students to show a culmination of their knowledge to the university, by using it to do good within the community.

6. Multi or Cross-Course Projects

Service learning projects may be broader than just one class. They may extend over multiple semesters or may be a part of the degree as a whole.

Assessing Service Learning Community Assessment

The community partners involved should be given the opportunity to evaluate both the student and the program as a whole.

Teacher Assessment

Teachers may assess the students' participation, but also their ability to link their experiences to class.

Student Assessment

Students may self-assess their own service learning. This can be a powerful activity mid-course so that students may change their actions if they feel they could do better.

Effective Qualities and Elements of Service Learning

1. Integrative

Service learning should holistically integrate class objectives into the service, and vice versa, the service should be worked into the course content as well.

2. Reflective

One of the most effective parts of service learning is the structured reflection provided by teachers. Students should be given time to think critically about their experience and build opinions, values, and goals based on these reflections.

3. Context

Service learning should allow for students to be able to apply their learning within the context of their own community.

4. Strength-based

Service learning should be based upon the strengths of a community, not its deficits. The strong programs that help the community do well should be the ones that students are helping to build up.

5. Reciprocal

Of course, both the organization and the student should benefit from the service learning. It should never be one-sided.

6. Lifelong

Engaging in service learning is something that will remain with the student for life. It can be career or mind altering and shape the student for many years to come.

Volunteering, Internships, Community Service Or Service Learning?

Service learning is not to be confused with volunteering, and it is also distinct from an internship. Where [community service and volunteering are valuable](#), they are service-based and community needs based. Service learning also incorporates the educational needs of the individual completing the service learning.

[Internships](#) are focused on fostering education but may not take into account the needs of a community. Service learning helps both students and the community.

Service Learning Benefits

Student Benefits

- **Learning Outcomes:** Students are better able to understand the course content with a real-world understanding.
- **Personal Outcomes:** Students learn commendable values such as using your strengths to help your community.
- **Social Outcomes:** Students are less likely to stereotype and may be more open to other cultures and have a higher sense of social responsibility.
- **Career Development:** Students learn valuable skills that translate to the work they will be doing. They also may decide on career paths based on service learning.
- **Relationship With The Institution:** Students who complete service learning may feel a greater connection to their university and faculty.

University Benefits

Universities benefit from allowing and encouraging teachers and programs to implement service learning. They may have a better relationship with the community as a result, and also have better student relations as well.

Faculty Benefits

Faculty benefit from service learning by feeling an overall sense of accomplishment and pride from their students doing good in their community. It is also rewarding for faculty to see students apply class learning to the real world, and vice versa.

Community Benefits

Of course, the community benefits from service learning as well. They have bright minds of local university students working to uplift the community through service learning. Many of these organizations rely on the universities for the support of students' service.

Overall, service learning is one of the most valuable things a student can do during their university career. What is service learning? It is working to better both the student and the community at the same time.

For more information on service learning visit:

<https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/what-is-service-learning/>