

---

# What is Service-Learning?

Service-learning is also known as community service-learning, academic service-learning, community-based learning, community learning, and experiential learning. Ultimately, the goal of these types of learning is to involve students in a wide range of activities that are of benefit to others and use the experience generated in communities to advance curriculum goals. These goals include: gaining a deeper understanding of the course/curricular content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Service-learning opportunities address concerns that are identified and articulated by the community. Service-learning combines these community-based service activities with structured preparation and reflection opportunities. Reflection is “sometimes described as the hyphen in service-learning; it is the link that ties student experience in the community to academic learning” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 171). Proponents of academic service-learning feel that the real-world application of classroom knowledge in a community setting allows students to synthesize course material in more meaningful ways and offers direct application of theoretical models.

*“Service-learning puts the practicality of complex ideas at your fingertips. In more cases than not, your comfort level and comprehension levels are stretched when dealing with real people and real world problems.”*

Student, Political Science  
Community Alliance for Global Justice

## Qualities of Service-Learning

1

### Integrative

The service-learning experience goes beyond traditional ideas of classroom learning, practicum training, or off-campus volunteering. Service-learning holistically integrates class learning objectives, faculty guidance, and community perspective and priorities. When engaged in genuine service students participate as both learners and community members. Students demonstrate success both academically and interpersonally.

*“..it is one thing to read about food scarcity, but interacting with people who do not have food on a daily basis makes the issue much more real.”*

Student, English  
Northwest Harvest

2

### Reflective

“The process of reflection is a core component of service-learning. Service-learning practitioners and researchers alike have concluded that the most effective service-learning experiences are those that provide ‘structured opportunities’ for learners to critically reflect upon their service experience. Structured opportunities for reflection can enable learners to examine and form their beliefs, values, opinions, assumptions, judgments and practices related to an action or experience, gain a deeper understanding of them and construct their own meaning and significance for future actions” (Moon, 1999, as cited in Connor & Seifer, 2005).

**3**

### Contextualized

Service-learning provides students a unique opportunity to access knowledge and expertise that resides in the context of community. There is opportunity to connect the knowledge of a discipline, as explored in class, to the knowledge in practice, as evidenced in communities. Learning experiences in community settings immerse students in the unpredictable and complex nature of real world situations. Working alongside community members and experienced professionals, the opportunity to construct learning and responses can be immediate and uncontrived.

**4**

### Strengths-Based

Service-learning draws upon existing community strengths and resources, and honors community members and organizations as co-educators of students. Communities are never built from the outside in. A strengths-based approach focuses on the capacity and expertise that exist in every community, rather than on what is absent. By shifting away from a deficit mentality, students learn partnership strategies to identify and develop each community's unique strengths.

*“The experience I had was truly life-changing. The inspiration I obtained for my professional future is monumental.*

Student, Social Welfare  
Wellspring Family Services

**5**

### Reciprocal

The service-learning relationship offers all parties involved some measure of benefit; it is a two way street. Students give time, talent, and intellectual capital in order to gain deeper understanding of course material and the nuanced nature of social issues. Course instructors modify their teaching practice to include service-learning and are rewarded with deeper student engagement of course material. Community members and organizations invest time as co-educators, and in turn accomplish more toward their mission and goals through the work of students.

**6**

### Lifelong

Service-learning is learning that sticks. By synthesizing theory and practice, this educational method provides a distinctive, meaningful, and influential life experience. Students build relationships, solve problems, value a sense of community, and gain self-awareness. Service-learning is beyond memorable; it can influence one's career path and enhance civic responsibility. Service-learning extends learning beyond the academic term; it lays the foundation for continual personal growth throughout the student's academic experience and beyond.

---

## Resources

University of Washington Carlson Leadership and Public Service Center <http://depts.washington.edu/leader/>  
National Service-Learning Clearinghouse <http://www.servicelearning.org/>  
Campus Compact <http://www.compact.org/>

## References

Connors, K. & Seifer, S. (2005). *Reflection in higher education service-learning*. [Fact sheet] Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.  
Eyler, J. & Giles, D.E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass Publishers.  
Moon, J. (1999). *Reflection in learning and professional development*. London : Kogan Page Limited, Stylus Publishing, Inc.