WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

Service Learning (SL) is a specially designed learning experience in which students combine reflection with structured participation in community-based projects to achieve specified learning outcomes as part of an academic course requirement. By participating in academic community partnerships at the local, national or international level, students gain a richer mastery of course content, enhance their sense of civic responsibility, and ultimately develop a more integrated approach to understanding the relationship between theory, practice, ideas, values, and community.

![Figure 1. Essential Components of the Service Learning Model](image)

As suggested by this diagram, Service Learning is a course-based credit-bearing experience that allows students to:

- Participate in an organized service activity that meets community needs, and to
- Reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995)

Service Learning, therefore, differs from volunteer efforts or community service by going beyond meeting community needs to equally benefit students by means of enhancing and strengthening their learning of the course objectives and by further understanding themselves, their society, and their futures. This unique reciprocity and emphasis on reflection is also what sets Service Learning apart from other areas of experiential learning at UC, including internships for credit, co-op, undergraduate research, and international programs.
In considering the University of Cincinnati’s Integrated Core Learning Baccalaureate Competencies and keeping current Service Learning best practices in mind, Service Learning also enhances the following:

- Social Responsibility
- Knowledge Integration
- Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Meaningful Service
- Asset Building

Many of these benefits can be obtained along the spectrum from community awareness courses to capstone Service Learning courses.

**Figure 2: Community Engaged Course Continuum**

Service Learning combines course content and community service-projects with reflection activities to aid students in making connections between them. It is possible for students to become aware of the community around them without a service project or even a declared community partner. The box at the left of the continuum represents a course in which students become aware of their surrounding community through observation. The oval in the center represents a course with a declared community partner but that assists students with their understanding of aspects of the community without engaging in a service project. The circle on the right represents a Service Learning course as described briefly above and in more detail in this handbook.

Members of the UC faculty are encouraged to review their courses and consider which level of engagement may best fit their course needs. See “Creating a Service Learning Course” in the Planning and Course Development section for suggested and required guidelines in developing a Service Learning course. All faculty who are teaching courses that foster community awareness can utilize this information, keeping in mind that this handbook was designed to exemplify Service Learning.

**COMPONENTS OF SERVICE LEARNING**
The following are essential elements of Service Learning and should be considered in course development:

**Reciprocity:** The service and learning must be worthwhile and valuable for both the student and the community. In other words, there must be reciprocity between the server and those served.

**Reflection:** Students should be guided through a process of frequent and varied reflection activities such as journaling, group discussions, reflection papers, and presentations about their community experience and how it resonates with course content in order to promote critical thinking. Such reflection also encourages students to be introspective about other aspects of their lives, thereby promoting meaning before, during, and after the service.

**Development:** Service Learning projects should be recognized as a process, which can move service and enable activities toward empowerment, observation, experience, and leadership.

**Meaningful service:** Service tasks need to be worthwhile, challenging, and a reinforcement of course goals in order to strengthen students' critical thinking.

**Diversity:** A priority is placed on involving a broad cross-section of students working in diverse settings and with a diverse population within the community.

**Sustainability:** For Service Learning projects to truly make a difference, long-term benefits to the community, students, and faculty should be considered with every community-engaged course.

**Asset Building Model of Service Learning:** In its early years, Service Learning sought to aid community partners and community members by ascertaining their needs and working to fulfill those needs. This need-based model of service provides temporary solutions to problems that are potentially societal in their scope. An asset building approach to Service Learning seeks to find ways to assess and then increase the assets of community organizations and their constituents with the goal of seeking long-term and even permanent solutions.

In addition to including these elements, the following practices should be observed:
- Engage students in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
- Provide structured opportunities for students to reflect critically on their service experience, both verbally and in written form, as individuals and members of teams.
- Articulate clear service and learning goals and responsibilities for everyone involved. From the outset of the project, participants and service recipients alike must have a clear sense of what is to be accomplished, what is to be learned, and how that is to occur.
- Allow for those with needs to define those needs.
- Match students and service needs through a process that recognizes potentially changing circumstances.
- Include or insure training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
- Insure that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.
- Make a commitment to program participation by and with diverse populations.

Specific Academic Criteria and Desired Outcomes for Service Learning can be found in the section on Planning and Course Development.

**Frequently Asked Questions:**

**Q.** Why should I teach a Service Learning course?

**A.** Benefits over and above a traditional course include the following:

- Students learn not only from the instructor, but from community partners, community partner clients and constituents, and from each other through their experience in their service;
- Service promotes a different type of critical thinking skill, including moral and ethical development;
- Students' understanding of practical applications of academic pursuits and multicultural values and traditions is enhanced;
- Retention is raised significantly from traditional lectures and reading when students are engaged in practicing by doing and through immediate use
- The community benefits by collaborative and creative problem solving while participating in student learning;
- Students and instructors provide meaningful service to the community while learning more about community needs;
- Students and instructors learn to synthesize and assess learning opportunities that involve multiple modes of expression;
- The instructor learns new methods of encouraging students' academic progress and comprehension; and
- New methods of instruction may lead to new research and publication opportunities.
Q. I sometimes feel that I have little time to complete my traditional course; how can I fit in Service Learning as well?

A. Service Learning is integrated into your curriculum not as an add-on but as an integral feature of your course. Instead of an additional text, for example, you might opt for a form of more dynamic information processing that service-learning provides.

The Center for Community Engagement and the Associate Director of Academic Community Partnerships are available five days a week twelve months of the year as resources to take much of the logistical burden of the course instructors and community partners. **However, for this service to be effective, you must start to plan Service Learning projects six to nine months in advance of the beginning of the course to allow for community partner and project development.**

Q. It sounds interesting, but how do I learn how to teach such a course properly?

A. This handbook is a start. Also, reflecting on your course and your goals two quarters ahead of the one in which you would like to teach a Service Learning course will provide adequate time to properly prepare for such a course. Specific questions can be addressed to the Associate Director of Academic Community Partnerships who will also make the connection between faculty and community partner. Attending breakfasts and workshops on service-learning that are offered at UC and other institutions are additional ways to learn more and to make valuable connections with other faculty and potential partners.

While any new course can produce some anxiety, most faculty report a steep learning curve in which confidence develops fairly rapidly once the course is underway. The good news is that as students engage in service activities, they are also taking an active role in their learning, a role shared in part by the community partners.