RISK MANAGEMENT
SERVICE LEARNING RISKS

ROLE OF FACULTY IN AWARENESS, PREVENTION, AND MANAGEMENT

This handbook describes the benefits and process of implementing a Service Learning component to your course. As faculty, you may be most familiar with the classroom or laboratory setting, each of which involves risks. Many faculty are so accustomed to those risks that they are handled without a great deal of conscious thought. For example, faculty do not allow students to smoke in a classroom or to bring in dangerous substances; lab students are instructed on safe procedures in the lab and dangerous chemicals are managed appropriately.

Faculty unaccustomed to considering students venturing outside the classroom may not be aware of the risks they need to consider as they direct, supervise, and assess students in other environments. What happens if an engineering student assists with calculations on a city project that results in an error costing the project money or time lost? What risks may be encountered when a sociology student observes and interacts with the homeless or those in jail or prison? Does it matter if a student drives herself to the community-partner site or takes a city bus?

All constituents—students, faculty, administrators, and community partners—may like to assume that problems won’t occur or that someone else will manage the problems. It is also frightening to consider all possible risks, just as it’s difficult to hear a doctor outline all the potential side effects of a drug or surgical procedure. It is crucial, however, even if the risks are small, that the constituents are aware that risk is involved and plan to avoid it. It is easier to plan for and avoid problems than it is to face them after they occur. It is best not to underestimate the potential financial and personal toll that comes once an injury or improper conduct occurs, as well as the possible litigation in response to such harm.

However slight the risk, it is important to discuss possible concerns ahead of time. Communication, therefore, is the key to managing risks associated with any kind of experiential learning, including Service Learning. To prevent misunderstandings, injury, and potential litigation, it is important that students, faculty, university administrators, and the community partner all work together to recognize and anticipate potential problems before they happen and to work together to eliminate the possibility of occurrence. A range of topics must be considered depending on the type of Service Learning involved, from participant screening through transportation issues. Creating a list of what may be applicable to the particular situation involved is the first step in preventing problems.
ROLE OF ADMINISTRATION AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Check with the Associate Director of Academic Community Partnerships for information about the community partner, what the on-site environment is like, and what agreements presently exist with that partner to insure a commitment to safety. All parties should be aware of the responsibility of each other in promoting a safe Service Learning experience.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Communication with the student is also essential, and students should feel comfortable talking with faculty, the community partner, and the Associate Director of Academic Community Partnerships about questions and problems that may occur. Before beginning the Service Learning component, review carefully with the student the forms each needs to sign; don’t merely ask them to sign the forms. By reviewing all points carefully in class, students can form a more realistic expectation of what the school and community partner can and cannot control, as well as the possible risks of the experience. This can also reinforce to students the responsibilities that they have to ensure a safe experience. Encourage independent student research. Require each student to personally assess his or her suitability and preparation for the Service Learning opportunity. Suggest that they evaluate the safety of the location and work on their visit to the site or by another means of investigation. Use waivers and releases, consent forms, disclaimers, and contracts to transfer all or part of the program risks to the students. A chain of reporting, and appropriate contact information, should be provided to students to discuss concerns, including emergency contact procedures.

COLLABORATION OF RISKS BETWEEN STUDENT, FACULTY, ADMINISTRATION, AND COMMUNITY PARTNER

The following list provides examples of risks that could be problematic for any Service Learning experience. These concerns may fall more clearly within the purview of the community partner or should be discussed between the community partner and Academic Director before the community partner is considered eligible for participating in Service Learning activities. Though the community partner may be pre-screened, faculty and students should also be aware of the range of safety concerns so that they may note and report failures to comply. No student or faculty should feel compelled to work in an environment that appears unsafe and should report any problems along the chain, from student to community partner to faculty to Associate Director. If any safety concern is immediate, or if a student feels that a report to the community partner is inappropriate, a student may move directly to faculty or Academic Director to discuss his or her concerns.
Various types of safety issues may arise at different steps in the Service Learning process. These are examples of some of the potential issues about which all participants should be aware.

**POTENTIAL RISKS TO REVIEW AND ALLOCATE**

**Screening Participants and Supervision**

- Develop an appropriate ratio between supervisors and student participants
- Screen the person who will be supervising student activity to ensure that the individual is both willing and able to provide good supervision
- Create and enforce supervisory policies and procedures
- Screen the student participants to ensure that they are academically, mentally, and physically qualified for the experience
- Inform students of any invasive screening tools that might be used (drug test or check of driving record)
- Advise students of the risks of the off-campus environment and the anticipated activity
- Provide appropriate safety training and address special needs that must be accommodated to perform the activity safely
- Ensure respect for the student’s privacy, dignity, and civil rights
- Develop policies and procedures for reporting allegations of discrimination or harassment and advise the student about them.
- Develop policies and procedures that will enhance safety (such as use of protective equipment, time limits, prohibited activity in certain types of weather or under certain conditions, safety reminders posted near power equipment or in hazardous areas)
- Restrict a student’s access to confidential and proprietary information at the off-site location and to materials with great value (narcotics, cash, or negotiable instruments)

**Premises Safety**

- Maintain heating, cooling, and ventilation that is appropriate for the environment and anticipated activity
- Ensure a safe means of ingress and egress and communicate an evacuation policy to the student
- Perform periodic inspection to ensure that the paths of ingress and egress are clear and safe
- Initiate/enforce appropriate crime prevention policies (such as good lighting and locks, escorts to parking lots)
- Perform inspections to ensure that the facility and its equipment are safe and ergonomically appropriate
Transportation

- Establish clear guidelines as to who is responsible for transportation to the from the agency site; students typically must arrange their own transportation without facilitation by faculty
- If transportation is needed on-site, safe transportation must be ensured, including checking the safety of the vehicle and the driving record and ability of the driver.
- If students drive agency vehicles, appropriate policies should be in place to clarify responsibilities.

Emergency Preparedness And Response

- Establish a contingency plan if the off-site location is unavailable for use for the anticipated activity
- Create a procedure to respond to a medical or other emergency
- Handle communications with campus constituencies (such as concerned faculty, staff, students, alumni) if a problem arises
- Handle communications with the parents and friends of any students affected by an emergency or other problem
- Handle media or governmental agencies inquiries if a problem occurs

Legal Compliance

- Obtain any licenses or permits for the activity or its anticipated location
- Comply with the laws of taxation, compensation, and benefits for people at the off-campus site
- Comply with laws governing the off-campus activity (such as building, or health or life safety codes)
- Comply with mandated reporting laws applicable to the off-campus activity (such as suspected child or elder abuse, release of hazardous substance into the environment, or workplace injury)