Defining Features: Service-Learning/Community Engagement Courses

Key Features

Service-Learning or Community Engagement Courses integrate meaningful community service with instruction and reflection that can enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Service learning typically includes a structured learning experience that combines community service work with reflection that helps students develop a "community context" to their education. As a result, students who take service-learning courses can connect their academic coursework to their roles as citizens. Service-learning is often considered a high-impact practice, that is shown to benefit students at any point of their educational experience. Service-learning courses can help students learn more, at greater depth, with greater retention, and an ability to integrate and apply learning to unscripted questions and novel situations.

Key Design Considerations

Because service learning courses ideally fit both the needs of an outside organization and of student learning, designing and implementing service-learning courses can be a time-consuming and demanding process. High-Impact service-learning courses, take into consider how the service work helps students achieve course outcomes as well as how practical the work may be for the students enrolled in the course. They also engage in an awareness of the community partner's actual needs. While design a service learning course, it is important to consider how student preparedness may impact learning outcomes and performance. Some faculty may need to prepare students beforehand on how best to conduct service work. Students may need to learn beforehand how to do the kinds of work they will be doing in the field and may need to learn more about the community they will serve. Faculty should also establish good lines of communication with the community partner to help address any logical or practical considerations associated with the partnership. Providing clear goals and articulating the scope of work students will be doing with the community partner are also components of course planning and design, as are creating concrete strategies for student reflection and assessment of student performance.

At SLU . . .

At Saint Louis University, The University's The Center for Service and Community Engagement offers a number of resources to help faculty create and maintain service-learning courses. The Center has a large database of potential community partners who have existing relationships with the University and can help faculty build a substantial relationship with community partners.

Selected Resources

Hesser, G. (Ed.). (2014). *Strengthening experiential education: A new era*. National Society for Experiential Education.

Howard, J. (2001). Principles of good practice for service-learning pedagogy. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *30*(1), 16-19.

Seifer, S. D., & Connors, K. (Eds). (2007). Faculty toolkit for service-learning in higher education. *Scotts Valley, CA: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.*

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.