

What is Service Learning or Community Engagement?

by Joe Bandy



Community engagement pedagogies, often called “service learning,” are ones that combine learning goals and community service in ways that can enhance both student growth and the common good. In the words of the [National Service Learning Clearinghouse](#), it is “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” Or, to quote Vanderbilt University’s Janet S. Eyler (winner of the 2003 Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service Learning) and Dwight E. Giles, Jr., it is

“a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students. . . seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. In the process, students link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development. . . experience enhances understanding; understanding leads to more effective action.”

Typically, community engagement is incorporated into a course or series of courses by way of a project that has both learning and community action goals. This project is designed via collaboration between faculty and community partners, such as non-governmental organizations or government agencies. The project asks students to apply course content to community-based activities. This gives students experiential opportunities to learn in real world contexts and develop skills of community engagement, while affording community partners opportunities to address significant needs. Vanderbilt University’s Sharon Shields has argued that service learning is “one of the most significant teaching methodologies gaining momentum on many campuses.” [1] Indeed, when done well, teaching through community engagement benefits students, faculty, communities, and institutions of higher education. Below are some of the benefits that education researchers and practitioners have associated with community engaged teaching. [2]

Student Benefits of Community Engagement

Learning Outcomes

- Positive impact on students' academic learning
- Improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in “the real world”
- Positive impact on academic outcomes such as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, problem-solving, critical thinking, and cognitive development
- Improved ability to understand complexity and ambiguity

Personal Outcomes

- Greater sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development

- Greater interpersonal development, particularly the ability to work well with others, and build leadership and communication skills

Social Outcomes

- Reduced stereotypes and greater inter-cultural understanding
- Improved social responsibility and citizenship skills
- Greater involvement in community service after graduation

Career Development

- Connections with professionals and community members for learning and career opportunities
- Greater academic learning, leadership skills, and personal efficacy can lead to greater opportunity

Relationship with the Institution

- Stronger relationships with faculty
- Greater satisfaction with college
- Improved graduation rates

Faculty Benefits of Community Engagement

- Satisfaction with the quality of student learning
- New avenues for research and publication via new relationships between faculty and community
- Providing networking opportunities with engaged faculty in other disciplines or institutions
- A stronger commitment to one's research

College and University Benefits of Community Engagement

- Improved institutional commitment to the curriculum
- Improved student retention
- Enhanced community relations

Community Benefits of Community Engagement

- Satisfaction with student participation
- Valuable human resources needed to achieve community goals
- New energy, enthusiasm and perspectives applied to community work
- Enhanced community-university relations

Models of Community Engagement Teaching

What does community engaged teaching look like in practice? There are many variations and each have their usefulness for different applications. According to Kerissa Heffernan, there are six general models. [3]

Discipline-Based Model

In this model, students are expected to have a presence in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences regularly. In these reflections, they use course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding of the key theoretical, methodological and applied issues at hand.

Problem-Based Model

Students relate to the community much as “consultants” working for a “client.” Students work with community members to understand a particular community problem or need. This model presumes that the students have or will develop capacities with which to help communities solve a problem. For example: architecture students might design a park; business students might develop a web site; botany students might identify non-native plants and suggest eradication methods.

Capstone Course Model

These courses are generally designed for majors and minors in a given discipline and are offered almost exclusively to students in their final year. Capstone courses ask students to draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their course work and combine it with relevant service work in the community. The goal of capstone courses is usually either exploring a new topic or synthesizing students’ understanding of their discipline.

Service Internship Model

This approach asks students to work as many as 10 to 20 hours a week in a community setting. As in traditional internships, students are charged with producing a body of work that is of value to the community or site. However, unlike traditional internships, service internships have on-going faculty-guided reflection to challenge the students to analyze their new experiences using discipline-based theories. Service internships focus on reciprocity: the idea that the community and the student benefit equally from the experience.

Action Research Model

Community-based action research is similar to an independent study option for the student who is highly experienced in community work. This approach can be effective with small classes or groups of students. In this model, students work closely with faculty members to learn research methodology while serving as advocates for communities. This model assumes that students are or can be trained to be competent in time management and can negotiate diverse communities.

Directed Study Additional/Extra Credit Model

Students can register for up to three additional/extra credits in a course by making special arrangements with the instructor to complete an added community-based project. The course instructor serves as the advisor for the directed study option. Such arrangements require departmental approval and formal student registration.

Ways to Integrate Community Engagement into an Existing Course

There are many ways to integrate community engagement into an existing course, depending on the learning goals, the size of the class, the academic preparation of the students, and the community partnership or project type. Below are some general tips to consider as you begin: [4]

- **One-time group service projects:** Some course objectives can be met when the entire class is involved in a one-time service project. Arrangements for service projects can be made prior to the semester and included in the syllabus. This model affords the opportunity for faculty and peer interaction because a common service experience is shared. One-time projects have different learning outcomes than ongoing service activities.

- **Option within a course:** Many faculty begin community engagement with a pilot project. In this design, students have the option to become involved in the community-based project. A portion of the normal coursework is substituted by the community-based component. For example, a traditional research paper or group project can be replaced with an experiential research paper or personal journal that documents learning from the service experience.
- **Required within a course:** In this case, all students are involved in service as an integrated aspect of the course. This expectation must be clearly stated at the first class meeting, on the syllabus, with a clear rationale provided to students as to why the service component is required. Exceptions can be arranged on an individual basis or students can transfer to another class. If all students are involved in service, it is easier to design coursework (i.e., class discussions, writing assignments, exam questions) that integrates the service experience with course objectives. Class sessions can involve agency personnel and site visits. Faculty report that it is easier to build community partnerships if a consistent number of students are involved each semester.
- **Action research projects:** This type of class involves students in research within the community. The results of the research are communicated to the agency so that it can be used to address community needs. Action research and participatory action research take a significant amount of time to build relationships of trust in the community and identify common research agendas; however, community research projects can support the ongoing research of faculty. Extending this type of research beyond the confines of a semester may be best for all involved.
- **Disciplinary capstone projects:** Community engagement is an excellent way to build upon students' cumulative knowledge in a specific discipline and to demonstrate the integration of that knowledge with real life issues. Upper class students can explore ways their disciplinary expertise and competencies translate into addressing community needs. Other community-based classes within the department can prepare the student for this more extensive community-based class.
- **Multiple course projects:** Community engagement projects with one or more partners may span different courses in the same semester or multiple courses over a year or longer. These projects must be broad enough to meet the learning goals of multiple courses over time, and because of this they may have a cumulative impact on both student learning and community development that is robust. Such projects may be particularly suited to course clusters or learning communities within or across disciplines, or course sequences, say, within a major, that build student capacity towards advanced learning and community action goals.



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