

The Office of Service-Learning

For those of us who work to provide best-practice educational experiences for our students in higher education, there is often a gap between theory and practice. It is not uncommon for Associate Instructors to be caught on one side of this gap, needing guidance about how to effectively connect theory and practice. Service-learning is a form of experiential education which can be particularly effective in helping university students make this connection. Service-learning has been defined by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform as “a method of teaching through which students apply newly acquired skills and knowledge to address real-life needs in their own communities (Payne, 2000, p.41).” A successful service-learning class includes these elements:

- The service is clearly connected to the academic component.
- The service meets a genuine community need as the agency defines that need.

Reflection is built into classroom activities and assignments to assist students in making academic connections between the work they do at their service site with what they are learning in their course.

The reciprocal relationship between the university and the community agency creates a significant and valued partnership in the education of the students. Service-learning is sometimes confused with volunteering or internships. Service-learning differs from volunteering because of its direct tie to the academic objectives of a particular course. An effective service-learning course fully integrates service with learning, while volunteering provides a service to the community without a connection to formal coursework. Service-learning differs from internships in that service-learning examines the service experience in the context of ongoing learning, while internships apply what has been learned in previously-taken coursework. Additionally, the concept of reciprocity supports a balanced approach where the intended beneficiaries of the service are both the service provider and the recipient of the service.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF INCORPORATING SERVICE-LEARNING INTO A CLASS?

As a pedagogical method, the value of service-learning has been described and documented by scholars since John Dewey wrote *Experience and Education* almost seventy years ago. For example, service-learning has been found to further students' critical thinking, improve their mastery of academic material, and demonstrate the relationship between theory and practice (Eyler & Giles, 1999). According to Mooney (2000), students benefit from service-learning in improved grades and increased learning, increased civic engagement, enhanced job skills, and increased tolerance of diversity. Students themselves appreciate being part of a service-learning partnership.

"I have a better understanding of the Bloomington community. I have seen how those outside of the University live and function, which has helped me realize that this is just not a college town, it is like every other town in America. I have also learned how non-profits function. I have taken classes about it, but seeing it first hand gives a much more powerful meaning."

For instructors, incorporating service-learning into a course has the following benefits:

- Students appreciate and often become more engaged in the hands-on learning experience.
- Instructors get to know students better than in the traditional classroom experience.
- Instructors can demonstrate concrete evidence in their curriculum vitae of their desire to incorporate both teaching and service into the educational process.
- Instructors can conduct community-based research, which is also a valuable addition to the curriculum vitae and for tenure and promotion reports.

Service-learning also has benefits for the community. Almost across the board, community partner agencies are underfunded, understaffed and rely heavily on volunteers and service-learners to meet the needs of their clients. And, in professional and skills-based courses, service-learning students can create valuable and much needed projects for area agencies. For example, students from classes in the School of Business create marketing plans and materials targeted to expand agencies' donor and volunteer bases. Students in a computer science class design webpages for community partner agencies that do not have the resources or technological skills to do so on their own. Service-learning provides the context for a mutually beneficial relationship where the university and community can look to one another as a resource. Service-learning can be an effective way to bridge the town/gown divide.

HOW CAN THE OFFICE OF SERVICE-LEARNING HELP INSTRUCTORS?

In an effort to provide both theoretical content as well as practical, real-life experience in the learning process, the Office of Service-Learning has a broad array of support services to help Associate Instructors with both teaching strategies and research opportunities. We provide support for curriculum and course development as well as staff members who lead reflection sessions that help to incorporate the learning element into the service experience. The Office of Service-Learning also provides an important link to community service organizations, and staff members are available to work with instructors to create service-learning partnerships by providing community agency background and contact information. Perry and Blouin (2006) found that the most important elements for creating a service-learning experience which is beneficial to both students and community partners are frequent communication and sufficient student preparation for the service project. The Office of Service-Learning assists instructors with the strategies and tools to support both communication with agencies and student preparation.

Some of the other services we offer in our mission to support instructors who wish to offer service-learning courses are as follows:

- Providing consultation and resources including instructional materials and grants to faculty and instructors who are interested and engaged in service-learning and community-based research.
- Coordinating and publicizing faculty/instructor discussions including informal and topical service-learning coffee hours, as well as our Faculty Fellows Program.
- Convening service-learning faculty/instructors in submitting publications and grant applications. In the past two years, the Office of Service-Learning has worked with faculty and graduate instructors to coordinate and facilitate the publication of a book on service-learning teaching portfolios entitled *Integrating Service-Learning Into the University Classroom*. The Office of Service-Learning has also assisted faculty in identifying appropriate grants to develop and support service-learning in their classes.
- Sponsoring an annual Summer Institute on the Scholarship of Engagement attended by faculty, instructors, graduate students, administrators and community partners.
- Providing Advocates for Community Engagement (ACEs) to facilitate service-learners into area agencies and to lead reflection sessions about service-learning experiences for any IUB course. Each undergraduate ACE works at a specific social service agency where s/he coordinates IUB service-learning and other volunteer experiences and participates in the business and service of the agency.
- Collaborating with instructors to create working relationships for service-learning and community-based research with many local community service agencies in Bloomington and Monroe County.

To get started in the service-learning partnership process, Associate Instructors need to follow several easy steps: 1) check with supervising faculty or department chairs to see if service-learning has been offered in the course before, and to get authorization to offer the course with a service-learning component; 2) contact the Office of Service-Learning to set up a meeting to explore possibilities for incorporating service-learning in their courses; 3) work with the staff of the Office of Service-Learning to plan the course, develop the syllabus, and make community contacts to create a successful service-learning partnership; 4) contact community partner(s) to agree upon deliverables, responsibilities and communication (it is recommended that instructors begin this conversation with a Memorandum of Understanding, available on the Office of Service-Learning website); 5) keep up communication about the service-learning experience with both community partner(s) and students throughout the semester, and (6) enjoy the benefits of helping the community while providing best-practice learning experiences for students!

Any faculty member or instructor who would like to explore the idea of offering service-learning as a course component is welcome to contact the Office of Service-Learning to set up an appointment to meet with one of our staff members (<http://www.indiana.edu/~copsl/>).