

IMPLEMENTING YOUR ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING COURSE

THE FIRST WEEKS OF CLASS

If you have never integrated service learning into your course, you probably would like some kind of timeline. Here are some ideas for the first weeks of class.

Discuss Service Learning when Introducing the Course Syllabus

The first day of class explain your rationale behind using service learning. Also, describe the nature of the service objectives (on-site or in-class) and class-related tasks (reflection, journals, projects). In the syllabus, make the link between the service learning component and course objective clear.

Administer a Service Learning Pre-Experience Survey

Whether you use the survey in this manual or create your own it is important that you find out what students are gaining from their service learning experience. One way to do this is to use pre- and post-experience surveys.

Clarify Service Learning Final Documents and Grading Criteria

Students will want clear guidelines for graded documents and assignments. They also have a right to know and participate in the creation of the grading criteria for those documents and assignments. Include the guidelines and grading criteria in writing. That makes these expectations clear for everyone. If you are going to use rubrics to assess activities and documents, provide them to the students at this time.

Have Students Sign a Service Learning Contract

Service learning contracts formalize the commitment of the students, agency representative and faculty member to the service learning experience. The contract should clearly spell out the tasks, expectations, and professional demeanor expected from everyone. Using a contract also enhances the credibility of the service learning experience and conveys to all that they have an obligation to fulfill their responsibilities.

Explain the Service Learning Time Record Form

Students should turn in a service learning time record form that documents their time at the community site. Each time students go on-site, they should check in and out. Before leaving the site, they should have the site supervisor sign their time record form. Collect these forms periodically throughout the semester. For in-class service learning projects where students do not make regular site visits, students should keep a time record of the hours spent on the project.

Conduct Orientation

The service learning site supervisor or community representative should conduct the orientation and training either in class or on-site (or in both places over two occasions). Through this orientation students find out what they will be doing (in-class service projects) or where they will be going and when (on-site projects). Discuss confidentiality and professional ethics as well.

Set a Deadline for the Service Activity to Begin

Students need to know that they fulfill their commitment to the organization. It is helpful to provide structure to the students by giving them a deadline for having started the service activity and an early accountability assignment such as a journal or form signed by the site supervisor.

DURING THE SEMESTER

Service learning does not stop after the first few weeks of class. Here are some suggestions to follow as you continue in the semester.

Conduct Reflection Activities and Give Feedback on Journals and Other Assignments

Research on service learning makes clear that frequent structured opportunities to tie service activities to course concepts and theories facilitate learning. Give your students reflection activities and critical synthesis assignments often and tie them to other class assignments.

Monitor the Activity through Mid-Semester Evaluations

You should conduct a mid-semester course evaluation to see how your students feel about the course. This will also help you obtain information about any changes you should make to facilitate student learning. Devote part of the mid-semester evaluation to the service learning experience. Use the results to modify requirements and procedures and to make mid-course corrections. You should also collect and check the time record forms kept by the students.

AT SEMESTER'S END

At the semester's end you will want to wrap up the loose ends and get everything finalized. Here are some suggestions for ending the semester.

Have Students Present their Final Projects

Encourage your students to share what they've learned with each other. Have them use things like classroom displays, reports, video presentations, panels, and skits. Students should present any in-class service activities to the organization's representatives at this time. The students can make the presentations either in the classroom or at the organization itself.

Administer the Service Learning Post-Experience Survey

It is important to collect data on your student's learning and experience. If you administered a pre-experience survey, then give them a post-experience survey with identical questions. This way you can measure the change in your students' attitudes from the beginning of the course to the end. You can include additional questions on the survey to gather information on things like student learning. Remember, student journals and service learning-related documents are other valuable sources of information.

Collect Service Learning Time Record Forms

You need to make sure that each student has fulfilled his or her commitment to the organization or project. See how many hours of service your students actually performed. You may find out that many students exceeded the number of hours required.

Celebrate the Students' Accomplishments with Certificates, Buttons, a Party, a Press Release, Photo Sessions, or a Letter from the Agency

Have a party!

Be sure to involve the agency representatives in your celebrations. Invite the faculty, administration, and community proper to share your successes. Celebrations provide a valuable sense of closure for students, the organization, and you.

AFTER THE COURSE

The semester may be over, but your job is not completely done. You need to follow up after the course. Here are some of the tasks you will need to complete.

Send a Thank-You Letter and Certificate of Recognition to the Site Supervisor

It is important to recognize and reward the hard work of the site supervisor through a token of appreciation. Send thank-you letters to anyone at the organization who assisted your students. Encourage your students to send thank-you notes as well-they could include information about what the experience with the organization has given them.

Meet with the Site Supervisor to Share Evaluation Results and to Plan Needed Revisions

It is beneficial to build ongoing relationships with the organizations with which you work. So, get together with the site supervisor and reflect on what went well and what did not. Make revisions that will improve the partnership next semester. The site supervisor is an excellent source of information about how to improve the service learning experience for your students in the future.

Write Up Your Learning Experience and Your Students' Responses and Publish Them

Remember that many college instructors would like to read about your experience using academic service learning. Write it up and present it at a conference or write an article for a journal on college teaching or for a journal in your discipline.