A Guide to Service-Learning

What is service-learning?

The concept of service-learning is a simple one: students will help provide a service for your agency as part of an academic course. By combining theory from an academic component and practice from real-life experience, service-learning fosters a broader understanding of not only the curriculum, but also of the students themselves and their place in the community.

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.
- The reciprocal relationship between the university and the community agency makes you a significant and valued partner in the education of the students.
- Time for students to reflect on their experiences is an important part of the course requirements.

How service-learning differs from volunteerism or internships

A service-learning course aims to fully integrate service with learning, while volunteering has little or no connection to formal coursework. Also, service-learning examines the service experience in the context of ongoing learning, whereas internships apply what has been learned earlier.

How service-learners will benefit your agency

You can expect a predictable amount of people-hours from students working on a project with your organization. In some instances, you will get skilled service from students who will shortly be in a job using those very skills. If you have a project that requires some special skills or research, or if you have something that requires 10 to 13 weeks of concentrated effort to be completed, your agency can also benefit from partnering with a service-learning class.

Examples of the benefits offered by service-learners

- Mentoring and/or tutoring school-aged children
- Assisting staff and providing technical support
- Assisting with grant writing
- Editing, writing and contributing to newsletters
- Researching issues
- Recruiting and mobilizing other students as resources
- Assisting with fundraising efforts

Examples of the impact of service-learning, in students' words

- Learning "the incredible value of community service for my own personal life"
- "Stepping out of my comfort zone and reaching out to help others was an incredible way for me to take my perspective off of myself and focus on the less fortunate"
- Becoming "aware of community needs and it is now our choice to determine how to help the community"
- Understanding "how small things can go such a long way"

How you can help with the students' reflection of their service

Engage the students in conversations about what they're thinking and learning, as well as help them understand the context in which they are serving. If it's at all possible, ask to address the class when it meets on campus, help with orientation, or lead discussions. Help the students see how their service contributes to the larger mission of your agency. For example, if students at the food bank are stuffing envelopes for a mailing, explain how much their efforts contribute to the feeding of families in our community.

Responsibilities of Parties in Successful Service-Learning Partnerships

Community partners

- Identify needs of agency that S-L class could fulfill
- Identify maximum number of students infrastructure can support
- Orient students to social issue, agency mission, and specific service work, either at service site or in classroom
- Supervise students when at service site
- Notify faculty member as soon as possible if problems arise
- Evaluate success of project at semester's end
- Provide time and opportunities for reflection with students

Faculty

- Articulate learning objectives for course
- Develop syllabus to include service component
- Create assignments that draw upon service experience
- Structure reflection opportunities into the course
- Identify existing or desired community partners or content areas
- Evaluate student academic performance
- Clarify communication route for students if problems arise
- Support students in maintaining professional behavior at their site

Service-Learning Program

- Provide information on service-learning in the faculty member's discipline if possible
- Identify ongoing community needs that might be met by S-L class
- Introduce faculty member to potential community partners
- Facilitate creation of partnerships and codified statements of expectations
- Provide risk-management information and informed consent templates
- Host orientation session in class or community
- Provide reflection activities and student leaders for reflection sessions
- Visit site where students are serving once during semester
- Provide evaluation instruments for community and instructor