



## CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF SERVICE-LEARNING STRATEGIES

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There are circumstances in which CIS affiliates may need or want to design and implement a service-learning strategy as part of a broader prevention or intervention program. In doing so, it is recommended that program planners use the evidence-based critical elements outlined in this document to ensure consistency with current research on best practices in the area.

### Overview

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives, with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the young provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills and knowledge content.<sup>1</sup>

The benefits of service-learning for students can be both extensive and deep. In the first place, research shows that high-quality service-learning tends to engage students with their schoolwork, improve their motivation and self-esteem, and strengthen their positive relationships with peers and adults. All of these in turn tend to reduce students' risk of dropping out of school.

Service-learning also provides developmental opportunities that promote a successful transition from childhood to adulthood, builds resilience and promotes

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<sup>1</sup>From the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse website:  
[http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome\\_to\\_service-learning/service-learning\\_is/index.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome_to_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php)

positive youth development. Service-learning accomplishes this by promoting growth in the following areas:<sup>2</sup>

- **Personal growth** applies to the development of characteristics related to self-improvement and self-actualization, including independence and autonomy and openness to new experiences.
- **Social growth** includes the social skills necessary for relating to others in society, such as communication and leadership skills and the ability to work cooperatively with others. Participation in service-learning is beneficial in strengthening these elements of social development.
- **Intellectual growth** encompasses the cognitive skills necessary to enhance academic learning and acquire higher-level thinking skills. This includes learning to apply knowledge and developing problem-solving skills. With high-quality service-learning, students can gain deeper knowledge and understanding of the curriculum.
- **Citizenship development** refers to the responsibilities of participation in a multicultural society and of citizenship in a democracy. As educators, we are obligated to prepare our students for these responsibilities, and service-learning offers varied possibilities.
- **Preparation for the world of work** includes development of those skills that are needed in the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as knowledge of a range of possible career directions. Service-learning can foster these characteristics from the earliest grades.

### **Elements of Quality Service-Learning Strategies**

**Service-Learning Framework.** To achieve service-learning's potential to promote youth development, practitioners developing their own service-learning strategy should use the following framework, keeping in mind that the framework is in fact a cycle, and all components are occurring throughout the process, often simultaneously.

1. **Preparation.** All service-learning requires careful preparation – by teachers, students and community partners.
  - Teachers must ensure a safe experience, attending to issues of risk management. Teachers of younger children will have to address more of the logistical issues, such as funding, transportation, administrative

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<sup>2</sup>From *The Pocket Guide to Service Learning*, by M. Duckenfield & J. Wright, revised 2001, Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center.

support, and working with the community partners and parents. Resources and materials need to be provided for the service activities.

- Students need to be involved in preparation throughout the process. As developmentally appropriate, students need to be involved in the needs assessment and analysis, service activity selection, and activity planning. All students must acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement the service activity.
- Community partners may never have worked with young service providers before. They need to be involved from the beginning and provided training for working with children and youth.

**2. Action.** This is the service activity itself. There are three types of service: (1) direct service in which the service providers meet the recipients, or perform hands-on work such as gardening or building; (2) indirect service such as fund-raisers, collection of food, books or toys; and (3) advocacy, in which students campaign for a cause or write letters to the editor on issues of concern.

Whatever the kind of service, these criteria should be met:

- Action must be developmentally appropriate.
- Service must meet genuine needs and be meaningful – for service providers, recipients, and the community.
- The action must have academic integrity, with links to the curriculum.
- Service activities need to have adequate supervision, whether by school, community or parent volunteers.
- Students should feel a sense of ownership of the service activity.

Note, therefore, that high-quality service-learning has positive consequences for both student participants and the broader community affected. Research suggests that service-learning activities extended over weeks or months can have more effective outcomes for student participants. But at least one study has indicated that the same service activity extended beyond 60 hours will have diminishing returns in this regard.

**3. Reflection.** This component enables students to think critically about their service experience. When students reflect, they think about their experiences, write about them, share with others and learn from them.

- There need to be structured opportunities for students to reflect.

- They should be offered multiple ways of reflecting: through discussion, reading, writing, projects and/or the arts.
- A cycle long advocated by service-learning practitioners is “What?” “So what?” and “Now what?”
  - What did you do? Describe your service.
  - What does this mean to you? How did you feel about what you did? How does this relate to what you have been learning in class?
  - Now what are you going to do? Should you change the way you are performing your service? Do you have some new ideas?

**4. Celebration.** This component refers to the celebrations and recognitions that take place during the service-learning cycle. It recognizes students throughout their service experience for their contributions. At the end of the service activity, it provides closure to an ongoing activity. Society needs to send young people the message that we value their service. Recognition can have a powerful impact on students, but needs to be well planned. Although all forms of recognition and celebration can positively affect students, some suggested recognition strategies that are most powerful include a party or event; a celebration including service to others; and, most powerful, systematic recognition, which should be built into the design of the service-learning strategy, practiced daily and celebrated by the group at the completion of all activities.<sup>3</sup>

Celebration can play a significant role in positive youth development. It should not be looked upon as frivolous. Attention paid to this component will strengthen the impact of the entire service-learning experience.

**5. Assessment and Evaluation.** All the partners, including students, are involved in evaluating the strategy. Achievement of objectives and goals is measured so modifications and improvements can be made. Also, students’ progress towards meeting the learning goals is measured, using diverse forms of assessment, such as rubrics, portfolios, performances, checklists, and observations by site supervisors, team members or the teachers.

**Additional Important Elements.** Over the years, the above framework has helped thousands of service-learning practitioners develop outstanding service-learning classes and school-wide strategies. However, to ensure that the most effective programs are implemented and successful service-learning experiences for young people fostered, evidence from past efforts suggests that strategies should:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>From *Motivational Elements in Service-Learning: Meaningfulness, Recognition, Celebration, and Reflection*, by H. C. Silcox, 1995, Philadelphia, PA: Brighton Press.

<sup>4</sup>Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (ASLER), National Service-Learning Cooperative, Youth Service California, National Youth Leadership Council, National Service-Learning Exchange.

- **Include youth voice/ownership.** Participants should play an active role in the selection, design, implementation, reflection and evaluation of the service-learning strategy. Students should take on roles and tasks appropriate to their age. A good rule of thumb is “If a youth can do it, an adult should not!”
- **Integrate learning with service activities.** Effective service-learning establishes clear learning outcomes that require the application of concepts, content and skills. The service informs the academic learning content, and likewise, the academic learning content informs the service. Teachers need to be thoroughly familiar with their curriculum, and in this way they will be able to make some curriculum connections beyond the obvious, strengthening the learning that can take place.
- **Involve true collaboration and partnerships.** The service activity often represents a collaboration among many community partners. These could be businesses, community organizations, parents, school administrators and staff, teachers, colleges and universities, social service agencies and of course students and recipients of the service. All partners benefit from the collaboration and contribute to its planning and implementation.
- **Promote civic responsibility.** The service-learning experience promotes student responsibility to care for others and to contribute to the community. Students’ participation helps them understand how they can affect their community and learn the skills required to do so. In addition, becoming aware of others who have different abilities, who come from different racial, religious and cultural backgrounds, or who are of a different generation helps develop sensitivity to their issues. Myths about groups in the community are dispelled and differences are valued.

### **Evidence-Based Program Evaluation**

Program evaluation is always an important part of program implementation, whether the program is an adopted model program or a locally developed one. Evaluation is particularly crucial for those developing their own strategies, to make sure that: (1) the most effective strategy was selected, (2) the selected strategy was implemented as designed, (3) the selected strategy effectively addressed program objectives, including focusing on identified dropout-related risk factors, and (4) the selected strategy resulted in the desired outcomes for participants.

## **Resources on Service-Learning Strategies**

### Articles/Books

Batenburg, M. & Pope, D. C. (1997). *The evaluation handbook: Practical tools for evaluating service learning programs*. Palo Alto, CA: Service-Learning 2000 Center. Now available from Youth Service California, <http://www.yscal.org>

Duckenfield, M., & Wright, J. (2001, revised). *The pocket guide to service learning*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center.

Kaye, C. B. (2004). *The complete guide to service-learning*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

*Service-learning and standards tool kit*. (2001). Denver, CO: Compact for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States.

Shumer, R., Duttweiler, P., Furco, A., Hengel, M., & Willems, G. *Shumer's Self-Assessment for Service-Learning* (2000). St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

<http://servicelearning.org/static/link/pages/136.htm>

Silcox, H. C. (1995). *Motivational elements in service-learning: Meaningfulness, recognition, celebration, and reflection*. Philadelphia, PA: Brighton Press. Now available from Institute for Global Education and Service-Learning, [www.igesl.org](http://www.igesl.org)

*The Linking Learning With Life Series*. Available from the National Dropout Prevention Center. <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>

### Videos

*Academics in Action*. National Service-Learning Partnership, <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>

*Assessing Learning Through Service*. (1999). Minnesota Department of Children, Families, & Learning (includes booklet).

*Route to Reform*, National Youth Leadership Council, [www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)

### Websites

Institute for Global Education and Service-Learning. <http://www.igesl.org>

Learn and Serve America. <http://www.nationalservice.org>

Learning In Deed. <http://learningindeed.org/index.html>

National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States.

[http://www.ecs.org/html/projectspartners/nclc/nclc\\_main.htm](http://www.ecs.org/html/projectspartners/nclc/nclc_main.htm)

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, information source for service-learning. <http://www.servicelearning.org>

National Service-Learning Exchange, training and technical assistance resource for service-learning. <http://www.nslexchange.org>

National Service-Learning Partnership, membership organization, with good resources that promote advocacy of service-learning. <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>

National Dropout Prevention Center, provides information, evaluation, resources and professional development on service-learning. <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>

National Youth Leadership Council, includes resources, information on their national conference, and professional development for service-learning. <http://www.nylc.org>

Youth Service California. <http://www.yscal.org>