



Tips and Best Practices for Service-Learning Course Design

Service-learning courses engage students, through placements or through projects, with addressing a real-world, community-identified need that relates to the course learning objectives and serves the public good. Through critical reflection, students demonstrate their academic, civic, and/or personal learning enhanced through the service-learning project or placement. Service-learning is a high-impact pedagogy that can take many forms in a course. This handout summarizes some recommendations from the Office of Service-Learning for developing service-learning courses at the University of Georgia. Please contact our office for more details.

Service Activity or Project

- Service-learning courses should include some sort of service activity that is relevant to the course's learning objectives and that provides benefit to the community or the public good.
- The service activity can be direct—such as tutoring children at an afterschool site, harvesting produce, or providing financial counseling; or indirect—such as developing a website, PR campaign, or policy brief.
- The service activity can be ongoing throughout the semester—such as working weekly with a regular program at a senior center; one-time—such as helping put on an Insect Zoo; or periodic—such as selecting any three workdays at the UGArden.
- The activity can take place during or outside of class time, individually, in small groups, or with the whole class, depending on the type of activity and the instructor and community partner preference.
- There is not a minimum amount of service time required by UGA to be considered a service-learning class; quality of the placement and activity is more important than quantity. On average, students report about 30-35 hours over the course of the semester, but there is a wide range across courses.
- Generally, it is better to have the service activity take place with a community partner selected and approved by the instructor, rather than asking students to seek out their own partner.
- Research suggests that students benefit more in placements working with people different than themselves.

Learning

- Credit is given for the learning, not just taking part in service or completing hours.
- For existing courses, it may be preferable for the service activity and reflections to *replace* another assignment, rather than being added “on top.”
- In addition to academic learning outcomes, service-learning often impacts students' personal, professional, cross-cultural and civic learning, which should be considered in constructing and assessing the course. Models such as L. Dee Fink's “significant course design” can help think through learning goals.
- Assessment of students' learning relative to the service activity should be intentionally designed into the course, and could include observation of student actions, evaluation of work by the community partner, analysis of critical reflections, pre-/post-service tests, and many other mechanisms.



The service activity is akin to an academic text--it is selected by the instructor to help accomplish particular course learning goals, and it can also be critically analyzed for themes and new knowledge.





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Community Partnerships

- The community or partner agency should help identify the need that the service-learning activity is addressing, as well as what role students and instructors can effectively play. Service-learning is not just a one-sided outreach activity by the university, but should be mutually beneficial.
- Instructors and the community partner should meet in advance to clearly discuss the service activity and logistics, such as: What will students need to know before starting this work? What will students do, and why? How will students get to the site, if off-campus? What is the best communication method? Who will provide supervision? How will student work be evaluated? What happens in the case of an adverse event?
- All service-learning partnerships should have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between UGA and the community partner, to help spell out expectations. A FERPA consent form is also available.
- Consider building in a formal “celebration,” presentation, or delivery of the service-learning project outcomes to the partner or stakeholders to help close the loop.

Reflection

- Critical reflection activities must be integrated into the course, ranging from “pre-reflection” before the service activity, to reflection during and after the service.
- Reflection should help make clear the connection between the course content and the service activities, and should go beyond just description, to include not just the “what?”, but also the “so what?” (how the service relates to the course content), and “now what?” (linking to future actions and new learning). Reflection can help students develop and demonstrate critical thinking, moral reasoning, and communication skills, and allows students to understand the social issue the service is targeting.
- Reflection activities can include written journaling, small-group discussions, arts-based or multimedia work, e-portfolios, poster sessions, blogs, and many other modalities.
- Reflection activities can also serve as effective assessment.

Structure

- A statement explaining service-learning and its role in the course should be included in the syllabus, to help make it clear to the students.
- Service-learning can effectively take place at any level, from First-Year Odyssey to doctoral; online and study-abroad are possible, too.
- Courses may build in class time for the service activities, or these may take place as outside assignments.
- Service-learning courses ideally should seek the “S” suffix through UGA’s CAPA system.

Resources

- The Office of Service-Learning offers periodic *workshops*, as well as year-long faculty development programs and faculty *awards*. Service-learning *support grants* are also available for helping with transportation costs, materials, background checks, or other course expenses.
- For individual or departmental consultations, help identifying potential community partners, or other information about service-learning at UGA, contact the OSL osl@uga.edu or 706-542-8924.



Partnering with the community involves a consideration of both partners' needs and constraints. When a course effectively engages with real-world problems, issues, or needs, it can be highly rewarding for students, instructors, and the community!

