



Faculty Forum

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Service Learning: What's In It For Me?

You're probably thinking, "Here they come again with another teaching gimmick and they expect me to use it." Well, Service Learning is not a gimmick. It is a time-tested and exciting method for enhancing the learning experience for students and faculty as it connects active classroom learning with community service. Any instructor in any course can ask students to complete a short-term community service project that is directly related to a chapter in the course text. Students perform the service, reflect on the experience, and you assign a grade--with the help of information gathered for you by the office of Service Learning. It is fun, easy, and extremely useful to students, faculty, and community.

Service Learning transforms abstract concepts on the printed page of textbooks into real, life-long learning experiences for students. It also assists faculty by offering them additional teaching, learning, and even researching opportunities. Finally, Service Learning provides countless hours of valuable service to community agencies while the university benefits through a strengthened cooperative relationship with the local community.

Service Learning includes three aspects of service:

1. **Direct Service:** Projects where students provide service directly to a client at a community-based agency, such as in mentoring or tutoring children or assisting at food banks, nursing homes, or homeless shelters.
2. **Indirect Service:** Students serve at a community-based agency on behalf of a specific population by developing fundraising programs, creating marketing strategies, or participating in painting, construction, and clean-up projects.
3. **Social Action Research:** Students conduct research designed to address the informational needs of an agency using applied classroom theory.

Service Learning provides hands-on experiential knowledge to students about community issues and populations, fosters a sense of civic responsibility, integrates and enhances the academic curriculum, and helps to clarify a student's career objectives. It has to be time consuming, right? No. All you have to do is make the assignment and let the Service Learning director know the goals of the assignment and the number of hours students are expected to log. The Service Learning office will do the rest, unless you want to help. You can give the Service Learning director the name of a specific agency to assign your students to or he will do it for you. The Service Learning office will provide a list of agencies willing to accept student volunteers. You can make an assignment related to any class topic and specify an agency to which students are to log hours. Your students come to the Service Learning Department where they will complete all the necessary forms before contacting the non-profit agency. The Service Learning director will be responsible for verifying that your students have completed the number of hours and activities specified and for forwarding a copy of the student's timesheet, signed by the agency representative, to you. The final step is for you to assign a grade to the student for the project. Easy, isn't it? Additionally, the Service Learning director will provide resources about Service

Learning and consult with you as needed to conceptualize, plan, implement, and assess a Service-Learning experience.

There are some disciplines that lend themselves more to Service Learning than others. For example, the Social Sciences, Humanities, Liberal Studies, and First-Year Seminar courses are easily suited to the concept. The Natural Sciences can infuse Service Learning into the curriculum with a little creativity. New faculty might find the Service Learning concept particularly effective because it allows for interpersonal interaction with students who are dealing with course materials while exposing the instructor to a community that may still be unfamiliar.

So what do you have to gain if you incorporate Service Learning into your course in the fall semester? Sorry, we can't promise an increase in salary. Recognition of the value of Service Learning in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions lies initially in the hands of you, the faculty, who serve on the appropriate committees. But there are other things that are of immediate benefit and almost as good as more money. You can conduct research on Service Learning and submit it to MountainRise, the Faculty Center e-journal, or to other journals like Change, About Campus, or The Journal of Experiential Education. Ultimately, you always have the satisfaction of knowing that you have significantly increased the value of the student's learning experience while strengthening the university's role in the local community.

The Service Learning Department plans to have all forms placed on the Service Learning web site by the beginning of the fall semester. Students will be able to download the forms and acquire appropriate signatures prior to coming to the Service Learning Department for agency assignments. We also plan to develop a chat room where Service Learning participants can reflect on their experience and exchange ideas. Instructors will be able to monitor discussions between students in their class and other Service Learning participants. Additionally, we have developed a Service Learning newsletter that will highlight participating community agencies, instructors, and outstanding students. We anticipate being able to maintain documentation of students who engage in Service Learning and who volunteer service throughout their career at Western so that the students can report their community service upon request or graduation as part of our current co-curricular transcript.

The Division of Student Affairs is excited about the reconstruction of the Graham building into a Service Learning residential center. Students living in Graham will meet specific criteria and interested students may be awarded scholarships. Fellowships may also be offered to faculty for research and instruction in the area of Service Learning. An architectural firm has been recommended to begin work on the Graham Hall project. In addition to residential quarters, Graham will include facilities for instructional and conference purposes. We envision banners of supporting agencies waving throughout the mezzanine of the main conference room. The Service Learning Department is also expected to become the central hub of volunteerism where members of the staff, faculty, and students not enrolled in classes with a Service Learning component will still be able to find information for community service placement.

You can now see how fun, easy, and useful Service Learning can be. If you are interested in adding Service Learning to your course in the fall or if you would like more information, contact me at 227-3059. This is the beginning of a new chapter in teaching and learning at WCU. You can be an important part of it.

Wayne Robinson, Director of Service Learning

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.