

Miami University White Paper on Service-Learning

Service Learning at Miami University: Terms of Engagement for Academics in Action

Experiential learning, democratic engagement and civic engagement, among other terms, are seen in the Service-Learning literature. It is essential for the University to define terms and have a shared vocabulary to communicate experiences. This White Paper will provide an institutional definition of Service-Learning, create a shared vocabulary and discuss some advantages and challenges of incorporating Service-Learning as a pedagogical tool for an engaged Miami University.

On February 23, 2009, Miami University Senate passed a resolution for a Service-Learning designation to appear on student transcripts and faculty annual reports. This resolution supports both the University's mission statement that, "...[Miami] empowers its students, faculty, and staff to become engaged citizens" and President Hodge's vision of an engaged university. The Senate's action acknowledges that Service-Learning is important for facilitating the development of student's identity in an engaged University and for providing structured ways to practice citizenship. Additionally, the Ohio Department of Education and Governor Strickland (in his 2008 State of the State Address) announced that Service-Learning will "be the norm" for K-16 education in Ohio. This vision mandates that we understand what we mean by the language used and how engagement looks in practice.

As The Faculty Learning Community on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, we hold the following statements as important assumptions underlying education:

- learning is motivated by vision,
- learning is a life long process,
- a purpose of American public education is to prepare citizens for a democracy,
- education has the potential to change lives,
- all education is value laden,
- language has power and is a place of struggle,
- without action, learning is ineffective,
- without knowledge, action may be dangerous,
- knowledge requires responsible action,
- each of us is relatively knowledgeable and relatively ignorant,
- educational institutions exist within systems of classism, racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of oppression, reproducing hegemony,
- social inequities exist in society,
- conflict can be productive to bring about positive change,
- American public universities should serve the goals of democracy.

We hold that Service-Learning has the potential to:

- deepen educational understanding,
- facilitate a mutually beneficial and reciprocal engagement,

- connect teaching, research and service to practical application,
- legitimize the evaluation of knowledge outside the academy,
- disrupt hegemony and bring about a more just and equitable society.

Service-Learning, skillfully done, is a pedagogical tool for faculty to:

- inform their teaching,
- meet a social need,
- co-create new knowledge,
- provide benefits to the community from the service and learning provided,
- ignite curiosity in students, increasing their motivation to learn,
- provide opportunities for students to acquire collaborative skills,
- encourage the community to view students as an asset,
- engage students in the development of academic skills,
- think critically and acquire knowledge in unique ways.

Service-Learning increases students' sense of civic and social responsibility. As students increase their understanding of economic, political, and social conditions and develop a connection with the community, they develop a willingness to take action and solve community problems. Participation in Service-Learning enhances students' ability to think in complex ways, fosters positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, and decreases risky behaviors.

Defining Terms:

Despite varied definitions of Service-Learning in the literature, each interpretation has common themes. First, experience is the foundation of Service-Learning. Second, Service-Learning aims to meet an actual community need. Another common theme of Service-Learning is that it is mutually beneficial to all involved. The partnership between the community agency and educational institution should be reciprocal. Third, Service-Learning places equal focus on the learning and service aspects of the experience. Fourth, reflection, or time to think about experiences and connect them to educational issues, is an important feature of Service-Learning. From these themes, **Miami University defines Service-Learning as an experiential pedagogical practice that uses action and reflection to meet needs and enhance learning through mutually beneficial, reciprocal partnerships.**

Benefits of Service-Learning:

Service-Learning provides numerous benefits to students, faculty, staff, universities and communities. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), Service-Learning promotes personal and interpersonal development, assists in understanding and application of knowledge, fosters engagement and intellectual curiosity, and contributes to effective leadership.

Benefits for Students:

Miami University focuses on the holistic development of students in an effort to foster “an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, [and] an ability to construct an internal identity...” (Baxter-Magolda, 1999). The holistic development of a student involves integrating cognitive complexity, interpersonal maturity and intrapersonal development (Abes & Jones, 2004). Service-Learning provides a potentially effective avenue for promoting student development in these areas. Service-Learning challenges students to engage in and use their abilities to turn theory into practice. Engaging in Service-Learning provides real opportunities for students to think contextually, which is an advanced stage of cognitive development. Contextual knowing is only possible through reflection. Students develop greater critical thinking skills as they actively attempt to solve authentic problems within communities. Service-Learning activities provide opportunities for students to struggle with and find deeper meaning in course materials, increasing the depth of understanding and retention, leading to an enhancement of in-classroom discussion and dialogue. Students sustain these dialogues by taking action outside of the classroom. Constructive engagement with others enables students to develop a compassionate view of the world. Mary Belenky (1997) coined the term “connected knowing” to describe students’ ability to imagine themselves in the place of an “other’s” position. Belenky (1997) writes that this transaction is only possible by a “deliberate, imaginative extension of one’s understanding into the other’s position.”

Jones & Abes (2004) argue that Service-Learning encourages students to try new experiences, interact with different people, and take healthy risks that result in lasting mutual benefits. Participants in Service-Learning begin to grapple with how similarities and differences shape relationships and enhance their perspectives. Dissonance leads to increased cognitive complexity and encourages reflection. Service-Learning complicates the knowledge students develop in the classroom by integrating the knowledge they acquire from their engagement with community. This integration of classroom and community knowledge guides students to re-situate the knowledge acquired in the classroom and invites them to dialogue, in collaboration with community, as to how knowledge can benefit the collective good. Students who are involved in experiential activities are more likely to retain course content (Barr & McNeilly, 2003). Service-Learning opportunities provide context for students to actively utilize content and practice the skills taught in the classroom. Ethical and public considerations are fundamental elements of a liberal education, especially in the context of a public university with a mission of engagement.

Benefits for Faculty:

Service-Learning offers rich and rewarding opportunities for faculty at any point in their academic careers. Faculty value Service-Learning because it improves and deepens student learning by translating theory into practice. Faculty and students work side-by-side contributing their time, knowledge, and talents, and learning from each other to assist in meeting community needs to solve an identified problem. Faculty report that Service-Learning enlivens their teaching and learning; re-energizes and connects them to other constituencies; and ties their teaching and research to intellectual endeavors taking

place beyond the university. It brings their academic discipline into focus, reminding them of the purpose of their work as they create new knowledge alongside students and community. It may stimulate new areas of investigative research resulting in new forms of scholarship. Service-Learning expands the concept of scholarship according to Ernest Boyer's (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professions*. While Boyer's scholarship of discovery and integration are most commonly used in the academy, Service-Learning supports scholarship of application and teaching as it applies knowledge in practical settings. Service-Learning may serve as an opportunity for faculty members and the University to become more recognized in a variety of fields beyond their academic discipline, advancing its reputation and good will.

Challenges of Service-Learning:

Meaningful and authentically reciprocal Service-Learning requires trusting relationships with community partners. Sufficient time is necessary to build and maintain these relationships. There are no shortcuts in developing an understanding of a community or in being able to articulate the needs of all involved. Such relationships can lead to complicated and unpredictable outcomes—and since such outcomes are not predetermined or entirely controlled by the faculty, Service-Learning can be messy. In the context of these complicated and organic relationships, faculty need time to determine how course objectives can best meet the needs voiced. This can be the opportunity for “teachable moments” but also can be time consuming for faculty. Service-Learning forces academicians to shift gears and view theory from a practitioner's perspective, requiring the researcher to ground theories in the complexities of reality. Dismissing this work as “service,” decreases its status in the academy and gives it little value in the tenure and promotion process.

Untenured faculty are often discouraged from choosing Service-Learning as a research agenda. Universities where Service-Learning is valued as a legitimate area for research use diverse parameters for evaluating faculty scholarship. Many universities talk about the importance of diversity yet expect all students to learn in the same way under the same conditions. Likewise, universities expect faculty to produce scholarship in “standard forms.” Service-Learning provides differentiation in instruction, benefiting various learning styles. Universities often judge new or unusual forms of scholarship as less academic, a contradiction to welcoming new ways of knowing and valuing diversity in instruction and research. Some administrators see Service-Learning as outside the conventional teaching and research models, discouraging untenured faculty from using Service-Learning as pedagogy, or as an area worthy of scholarship prior to tenure. Junior faculty grow frustrated when universities categorize Service-Learning as mere scholarship of engagement or service. Miami University's tenure and promotion policies lag behind the innovative practices pioneering at top universities—approaches that enlarge what counts as a publication, who might count as a “peer,” and the value of scholarly work in a local context. Miami University is included in the publication, “Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University.” This report urges universities to enlarge their understanding of what “the democratization of knowledge on and off campus” can mean and to re-imagine new possibilities for tenure. A conceit of academia is seeing itself as the primary site for the

production of knowledge. Yet it is not the only site, as knowledge is produced in many places and forms.

Some faculty have heavy teaching loads that deter them from the level of commitment needed for Service-Learning. Others note the need for some Service-Learning projects to occur over multiple semesters and therefore the need to teach the same course over time. The lack of knowledge about Service-Learning pedagogy and available university resources prevent some faculty from invoking this pedagogy. It is possible to mitigate these challenges when Service-Learning is rewarded as vital to the core mission of the university.

The Voice of Community Partners:

This whitepaper is designed to define the terms and advance the dialogue concerning Service-Learning at Miami University. It is not the place of the Faculty Learning Community to speak for community partners; we leave space for them to exercise their own agency and voice.

Summary:

Given the current economic crisis and mounting global challenges, taxpayers may resent institutions of higher education if they are seen as isolated in an “ivory tower”. Taxpayers may, rightfully, ask, “What are you doing with what you know? How is your knowledge used to help solve challenging problems?” Economic and political dilemmas, presently viewed as threats, may be seen as opportunities for change through Service-Learning pedagogy. Economists view the world from a deficit model: something only has value if it is scarce. Traditionally, the academic world has followed that model, but new times call for new ways of engaging. Service-Learning provides a pedagogical model that makes the academy relevant. We may choose to follow a model of abundance: the more we give to our communities, the more we receive in learning and understanding so that new knowledge is produced which serves the greater good.

On March 27, 2009, the United States House voted 321-105, and the United States Senate voted 78-20 to increase National Service programs. President Obama applauded all those who worked to push this bill through Congress expressing, “This legislation will help create new opportunities for millions of Americans at all stages of their lives.” He also noted, “[The] work is not finished... – it has just begun. While our government can provide every opportunity imaginable for us to serve our communities, it is up to each of us to seize those opportunities.” Obama calls on all Americans to capitalize on the resources they have to serve their communities, enriching their lives and those of others.

Miami University aligns with the national agenda. To be successful, President Hodge’s call for an Engaged University must include a reexamination of tenure policies, accounting for Service-Learning and publicly engaged academic scholarship. Miami University can define for itself and others how an engaged University looks and sounds. Collectively we can be a national leader in setting the agenda of a democratically engaged public university.

Works Cited

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Resources and Service-Learning (SL) Course Designation:

Please contact the Office of Community Engagement and Service to locate bibliographic information, books, community agency contacts and other resources. See the web page (<http://www.units.muohio.edu/saf/service/>) or call 513 529-2961.

Faculty may apply for Service-Learning (SL) designation by sending their syllabus to the Office for Community Engagement and Service. The course must meet the following broad criteria:

1. The course has a formal, academic curriculum that is rooted in the discipline in which the course is offered;
2. The course provides structured opportunities, in and out of class, for students to connect their service activities to the course curriculum;
3. The course contains academically relevant and well-organized community-based learning projects, developed in authentic partnership with community leadership, through which students directly serve a constituency;
4. Assessment is defined in the course grading and learning objectives;
5. Community-based learning is incorporated into the course's learning objectives;
6. Faculty seeking the "SL" designation for a course will submit the syllabus and a Memorandum of Understanding Service Plan to the Office of Community Engagement and Service.

Faculty, who choose not to embed Service-Learning into the course for all students, may choose the option of a 'plus one' credit for students who wish to participate in Service-Learning related to the course content. The faculty member should submit the 'plus one' requirements following the same criteria to receive the SL designation.

According to the University Senate resolution, Department Chairs and Deans will acknowledge this 'SL' designation as added value when reviewing credentials for promotion, tenure and annual reviews. The 'SL' designation will appear on student transcripts for these courses and on faculty annual reports.

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