

## Tips for getting started

What are the criteria for determining whether service-learning would be useful to your course? What do you need to do to ensure that your course is responsive to community concerns, and reflects the desired outcomes of the course? The following list of tips is presented to ensure that service-learning is appropriate for your course, and is optimal for achieving community-identified concerns in partnership with the community (Cunningham, Craig A, 2000; Zlotkowski, E.). These tips may be helpful when converting a traditional course to a service-learning course, or designing a new course.

**Establish learner outcome and competencies.** If you have not already established the learner outcomes and competencies for the course, you may wish to review Unit 2.

**Determine whether the course selected is appropriate in terms of achieving its objectives in a community setting.** *Not all courses are meant for or are considered useful for community-based service-learning experiences.* How optimal is the course that you've selected for advancing its objectives through service-learning? Will you be developing a new course? Or will you be modifying an existing course? These questions are important to consider and discuss at faculty meetings, curriculum development meetings, and partnership planning meetings. Involve community partners and students in the discussion around the appropriateness of integrating service-learning into an existing or new course.

**Define a service-learning experience.** Before course development begins or revisions are made to an existing course, it is important for the partnership to define what is meant by a service-learning experience. Referring to the handout, "A Continuum of Community-Based Learning Experience," the partnership can establish its position on this continuum and design a course that best reflects the group's definition of service-learning for future direction (Bruce and Uranga McKane, 2000).

**Select the type of placements, projects, or activities that facilitate the service and learning related goals.** What organizations and agencies are potential partners in the service-learning course? Are they appropriate settings for carrying out course content, as well as service and learning activities? What are their limitations, if any, for addressing course content and competencies?

**Determine the appropriate structure and requirements for the service and learning components.** As you design the course, it is important to determine the structure and requirements; in other words, will the course be mandatory or elective? Will it be short-term or long-term? How much time will be spent in the classroom versus the community setting? If the course is short-term, how will you be able, if at all, to ensure that the activities are sustainable? Will students be working solo or in multi/interdisciplinary teams? The structure and requirements of the course may vary depending upon the nature of the course and the scope of the community activities. A course is more likely to be sustained if it is a required component of the core curriculum. If it is not possible to offer the course as a requirement, consider offering it as an elective or optional course. This

will allow you to build support for the course and track your successes early on. Units 7 and 8 provide more information about building course infrastructure and sustaining course activities.

**Determine how students will be graded.** Grading is something that must ultimately be guided by a course director's own principles and philosophies. However, exposure to standard practices and examples of grading techniques across the service-learning community is beneficial. Some service-learning faculty grade the service piece of the course on a pass/fail basis—either the students completed the requirements or they did not. Similarly, some grade journal writing or online discussion participation on pass/fail basis based on whether the students made the required number of entries or comments. Others grade the service portion of the course based on an end-of-term portfolio, research project, or community experience portfolio. Make expectations as to length, frequency, quality, and content as explicit to students as possible.

**Determine how the partnership may facilitate student learning.** What role will members of your partnership play in facilitating student learning? Some examples of the potential role community partners can play include but are not limited to: facilitating reflection discussions, mentoring students in the community, presenting to students on issues related to course content, and guiding or participating in community-based research activities with students.

**Incorporate meaningful reflection activities.** Reflection is a critical component of service-learning and “facilitates the students’ making connections between their service experiences and their learning (Eyler et al., 1996).” A variety of unique methods and tools can be used to foster high-level critical reflection, including dialogue, “journaling,” story-telling, photo-journaling, and more. The process of reflection allows students to explore the broader social, political, economic, and cultural issues affecting society and their civic roles as citizens and professionals. Suggested reflection resources are available at the end of this unit to support the development and implementation of reflection exercises.

**Determine the appropriate classroom workload for the course.** This tip is particularly important if you are transitioning from a traditional lecture-based course to a service-learning course. For example, will there be less or more reading, fewer or more problem sets? Will there be fewer or more cases or tests? What types of learning can the service-related work facilitate that are currently being covered in another way, or that are currently being assessed in another way? What are the grading requirements?

**Develop a course that may be structured from past or current student service projects.** Faculty members are encouraged to design service-learning courses that build on past or current student service projects, within the curriculum or outside of the curriculum. For example, findings from a community assessment conducted by students in the fall semester might be used for program implementation or evaluation activities as part of a course offered in the spring semester. Rather than involving students and

community partners in a repetitive project, identify ways that the course can set the stage for or complement future student activities!

**Consider different strategies for continuing the partnership and course activities during academic breaks.** The partnership may wish to explore alternative break activities, such as Break Away (<http://www.alternativebreaks.org>), student internships or fellowships to serve as a bridge between the academic calendar and summer breaks. Identifying different strategies to continue course activities will limit the disruption and interruption of efforts. Several suggested websites at the end of this unit provide resources that you may wish to refer to.

**Identify opportunities for student and community orientation to the service-learning.** Prior to the implementation of the service-learning course, it is important to create opportunities to orient faculty, students, and community partners to the course and activities. The orientation may provide information about the course content, the community service activities, the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder, and an overview of the teaching methodology being used.

**Identify opportunities to prepare community partners for their role in teaching and supervising students.** Depending upon the role that community leaders are playing in the course, it is important to provide support for community partners who will teach and supervise students. How might the campus and community agency support skill development for community partners in this area? Support might come in the form of mentoring, attendance at local or national meetings, workbooks or other useful resources. Units 2 and 7 provide more information about the importance of skill and leadership development for community leaders.

**Identify appropriate assessment strategies for the course.** Unit 6 provides a comprehensive strategy for course evaluation and assessment. Unit 3 provides an overview of student assessment for your review. As part of your assessment strategies, consider using pre and post tests, journals, work logs, supervisor reports, project deliverables and self-assessments to evaluate students.

**Ensure that time, staff expertise, and facilities are available within and outside of the academic institution.** Units 7 and 8 provide more information about building and maintaining program infrastructure, including issues related to faculty development, funding, staff and student availability and commitment, community and campus facilities, and more. Ensuring that the necessary time, staff and expertise, and facilities are available is essential before the partnership's activities can be developed and advanced.

**Determine if the course is feasible in terms of community expectations.** A key reason for involving community partners in the design of the course is to ensure that it meets or is responsive to community expectations. Issues related to expectation-setting can be discussed and resolved in the partnership planning meetings. The most important issue is to have a clear understanding of community expectations before and while the course is being designed and community-based activities are established.

**Ensure that the course is appropriate in terms of students' learning the content.**

How will the service-learning course fulfill student learning expectations? Unit 3 provides information related to fostering student competency through service-learning. It is important to involve students in the discussion of the type of course that would help them build their skills and knowledge through real-world experiences.

**Ensure that the course incorporates civic/public issues to which the students' community-based activities might lend themselves.** Service-learning courses provide excellent opportunities for incorporating issues related to professional responsibility, peace and justice, diversity and stereotypes, public policy and others. Often the discussion of these issues emerges through reflection exercises and the use of related texts and media.

**Ensure that the course allows students to develop their critical thinking skills.**

Students who have been involved in service-learning experiences indicate that their problem-solving and critical thinking skills have been improved through working on team projects involving the community (Gelmon & Holland) Awareness about their improved critical thinking skills and ability to see themselves within the context of a broader world view can be captured through the practice of reflection.

**Identify opportunities for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary learning among faculty, student and community leaders.** Are there opportunities for faculty from a broad range of disciplines to participate in designing a course that fosters interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary experiences for students in the community? Are there opportunities to involve a diverse range of disciplines in the learning experiences such as business, foreign language, technology, physical fitness, or creative arts students? Even if the course is in an early stage of development, it can be useful to consider future opportunities for incorporating interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary learning.

**Ensure that the course is capable of fostering in students a tolerance and acceptance for diversity.** Service-learning courses are excellent forums for broadening students' worldviews, and building tolerance and acceptance of others. Unit 8 provides several resources that may be helpful to enhance student understanding of diversity and acceptance.

**Ensure that the course is capable of addressing community strengths and assets as well as needs.** It is very common for service-learning courses and activities to address a particular "need" in the community. In the process of course development, it is important to consider how the emphasis on "need-based approaches" can hinder good community relations and effective outcomes (McKnight and Kretzman). Rather than designing courses with an exclusive focus on community needs, place a more balanced emphasis on community assets and strengths in planning the course. For example, a case study describing a community organizing project among the elderly poor in San Francisco's Tenderloin District described a balance between need and asset based approaches to community building, stating:

*“Although the Tenderloin suffers from a plethora of unmet needs, it also has many strengths on which to build, including multiculturalism. The Tenderloin has for years had its own multi-language newspaper. Several large and widely respected churches, a comprehensive and progressive local health center, and an active neighborhood planning coalition and housing clinic were among the ‘building blocks’ identified by organizers as potential supporters, allies, and advocates in the effort to create an environment in which residents could become empowered (Minkler, 1997).”*

Only when the organizers described in this case study considered focusing on both needs and assets were they able to develop activities that truly benefited the local community. This type of approach helps students view communities as multi-faceted entities, not just places with endless deficits. John McKnight and John Kretzman have several books and workbooks that address the asset-based approach and are found in the suggested reading section within this unit.

**Identify meaningful opportunities to involve students and community partners in the development of the course and activities or to lend their educational skills during the course.** Drawing upon the knowledge and skills of the students and community partners is an excellent strategy for enhancing the learning activities for the course. For example, there may be an opportunity for a community partner to participate in the classroom as a guest speaker. As part of the teaching experience, the community partner may wish to discuss a problem related to the course objectives and develop a role play scenario that reflects a real community situation. Students play different roles and explore some thorny issues that emerge. Community partners can be particularly helpful in assisting students expand their frame of reference and understanding so that they become more comfortable and competent working with members of communities different from their own communities of origin. Students also have key strengths and assets that can be considered; how might the campus student groups and associations contribute to the course and activities? What student leaders can serve as liaisons to the community and campus groups? Tap into both community and student resources and skills!

**Develop opportunities within the course for involving students and community partners in planning and implementing community activities.** This particular “tip” is really dependant upon the *type of service-learning course* that you are developing. If the identification of community issues is central to the course, then it is important to involve key stakeholders, including students and community partners in this process. The following section provides tips for planning, assessment and priority setting as part of course activities.

**Do not wait until the plan is 100% perfect to launch.** Pick a reasonable starting point and launch the service-learning course with the goal of making improvements every year. Many of the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health partnership principles are “ideals” and may not be possible to achieve within the first year of the program. Instead, the partnership principles should be seen as guidelines for how to refine and improve

efforts over time. “Keep a sense of humor,” “be flexible,” and realize it’s “a marathon and not a sprint.”

### ? Reflection Questions

- Why do you want to change your course?
- What are your preliminary thoughts on how service-learning can/will affect student learning outcomes? Community outcomes?
- How do you see your role changing as a faculty person in the course, if at all?
- How might course activities address the issue of culture and disparities?
- If planning and assessment activities are part of the course, what steps will be followed to effectively develop them? What role will students, community and faculty leaders play?
- How, if at all, will the course’s assessment and planning activities be built upon for future courses?
- How will data from the course’s assessment and planning activities be shared with members of the community?

### Case Studies

The following case studies focus on key themes related to planning service-learning course instruction and activities.

#### ***Case Study: Community-Based Participatory Research: The Baltimore Safety Net Access Project***

*The following case study focuses on the Baltimore Safety Net Access Project. More information about this program can be obtained by contacting Tom O’Toole, Assistant Professor of Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, by phone: (410) 614-0093 or email: [totoole@jhmi.edu](mailto:totoole@jhmi.edu).*

#### Background:

Medical students in the Soros Service Program for Community Health summer internship are required to conduct a community-based project that treats education, research, or service-enhancement based. For the summer 2001 class, the consortium of community-based organizations that host the students decided to conduct a needs assessment and access to care survey at their eight sites. The goal of this summer’s project was to (1) use the surveys to identify the shared needs and issues of safety net providers (homeless shelters, soup kitchens, community health centers, drop-in centers); (2) use this project to promote the collective advocacy interests of the group rather than as fragmented or isolated concerns; and (3) map issues and needs specific to each organization that can be useful to their own fund-raising and internal assessments. The result was a comprehensive report on the availability of services and unmet needs in Baltimore city ([www.soros.org/baltimore/assets/2001\\_access\\_report.htm](http://www.soros.org/baltimore/assets/2001_access_report.htm)).

#### Project description: