10 Tips For Service-Learning Success

1) Remember: Service-Learners are Students, Not Volunteers

Supervisors must always keep in mind that service-learning differs from volunteering or community service. Service-learning is a method of teaching that is tied to learning by combining formal instruction with a related service in the community whereas community service involves services volunteered by individuals or an organization to benefit a community or its institutions not tied to learning. Students want to help meet important community needs using the experience as a basis of understanding their college course. Students are receiving credit for learning through their service efforts. Help students think about what the experience means to them, the organizational context, and overall societal issues and impacts.

2) Be an involved Teacher and Mentor.

Throughout the semester the supervisor should help the student interpret the experience and the relationship between what he/she is doing and the work of the agency. The student-supervisor relationship is one of the most significant parts of the student's experience and often determines the success of the placement. The supervisor is truly a partner in the student's education and should view him/herself as an 'educator'. You can help students reflect on the experience by asking questions such as: “Do you feel like you are making a difference? How?” or “Has this experience changed the way you view [the community need you address]?”. 

3) Plan Ahead - Be Thorough In Describing Your Projects

Clear, well thought out service-learning placement descriptions outlining tasks, responsibilities, and required skills will increase the success of your project over the course of the semester. Meet with your staff to help identify ways that students could assist your agency. Positions that carry some degree of responsibility and involve client contact are ideal.

4) Be Mindful of the Semester Timeline.

Remember to check the academic calendar and be aware of service-learning deadlines. Orientations should be completed in the 3rd and 4th week of the semester and you can expect students to serve for only twelve to fourteen weeks before the semester is over.

5) Be flexible and Realistic

Try to work with student's schedules as much as possible. Be aware of school breaks (ex: Spring Break, Thanksgiving) and know that students will either be wanting to serve extra hours at that time or may not be available at all. It is up to you to accommodate as you see fit.
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6) Be Selective. Some students may not meet your agency’s needs.

Although establishing a clear project description and listing student requirements up front helps to match students to your opportunity, it is okay to refer a student back to the SL office if their qualifications and/or motivations are not in harmony with your needs. It is your right and obligation to request different student if needed.


Students need to complete a thorough introduction to your agency, staff, and client base. Students should be familiarized with your mission and the key community and societal issues you address. The orientation should answer such questions as “Where do I fit in? How do I get information/support if my supervisor is not available? What should I expect to learn from this experience?” Introduce students to staff, give them a tour of your facility, and make sure they feel comfortable and know how to proceed with their service, including specific training. Set up checkpoints through the semester and establish measures of accountability to ensure your agency and the students are benefiting from the project.

8) Say Thank You

Like everyone, students want to feel welcomed and appreciated. This may take many forms from letters of recognition, to a thank you note, to a simple acknowledgement of a job well done. They also need to see and understand how their work is important to the agency's mission. Reinforce their contribution through the project at the end of the semester. Ask the students how they feel about the experience and what could be improved for future students working with your agency.

9) Develop Relationships With Faculty Partners

Community Partners are encouraged to maintain communication with faculty. Speak with faculty about their goals of the experience as related to course materials and how they expect the experience to be evaluated. It is also helpful to discuss any course/project deadlines and the desired method/frequency of exchanging feedback.

10) Attend the Community Partner/Faculty Mixer hosted by SL each Semester

The mixer is a great opportunity to connect with faculty and other community partners. Refreshments and free parking is available for this event which takes place each semester. Celebrate your hard work too!

REMEMBER: we are here to help, talk to us.
Keep us informed about any concerns, problems, successes, or other pertinent issues related to the project placement and/or student. Contact Anna Bailey, Coordinator for Faculty and Community Engagement, at 426-5722 or annaabailley@boisestate.edu.