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# Service-Learning Challenges and Strategies

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**Abstract**

The benefits of service-learning are often highlighted; however, there is not much discussion surrounding the challenges. This list provides challenges that partners, students and instructors may encounter in service-learning along with potential strategies for addressing them. This list was compiled by participants in the Spring 2015 VCU Service-Learning Institute.

**Disciplines**

Higher Education

## Service-Learning Challenges and Strategies<sup>1</sup>

The benefits of service-learning are often highlighted; however, there is not as much discussion surrounding the challenges. This list provides challenges that partners, students, and instructors may encounter in service-learning along with potential strategies for addressing them.

### Community Partner Challenges

- Scheduling
- Accountability/responsibility
- Integrating students into program/organization
- Coordinating appropriate student activities
- Expectations (too high or low)
- Supervision (Time sensitivity)
  - “Babysitting”
- Skillset (matching to needs)
- Goals Partner vs. Student (misalignment of goals)
- Being willing and open to suggested changes
  - Possibly give up control and/or “old way of doing...”
- Logistics – practical matters
  - Student travel, office space... etc
- Trust (between community and organization/citizens)
- Cultural barriers
- Empathy
- Be approachable/available
- Specificity
- Student initiative balance
- External influences (unexpected)

### Partner Strategies

- Open communication with students
- Planned check-ins with instructor
- Clear expectations to students (written and verbal)
- Get copy of syllabus
- Be aware of learning goals and objectives
- Flexibility!
- Instructor supervised projects (helps with trust, expectations)
- Tell instructor what cultural barriers are present so instructors can help students prepare
- Have multiple methods of communication
- Provide constructive feedback throughout course
- Discuss type of feedback that is effective and efficient
- Model behavior expectations for students

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<sup>1</sup> This list was compiled by participants in the Spring 2015 VCU Service-Learning Institute.

## Student challenges

- Overwhelmed by expectations
- Time management/scheduling
- “How do I get an A?”
  - How am I evaluated
- Who else is in my class/group
- Transportation
- Communication (How do I communicate with community?)
- Fear/Stress/Anxiety
- Am I actually helping? (if I’m just filing)
- Power/agency (lack thereof)
  - To choose community partner/class group
  - To say “I don’t like this”
- Connections to learning
- Reflection (potentially not understanding how to do it)
- How does this help me get a job
- Uncertainty
- Sustainability
  - How does it continue when my class is done
- Walking the line between adult/kid
- Insider/outsider status
- Is this cool/entertaining
- Will there be WiFi?
- No pictures?!
  - Privacy issue/understanding
- Can’t do real work?!

## Student Strategies

- Instructor sets up clear structure (in syllabus and verbally)
- Instructor explains transferrable skills students will learn
- Know boundaries
- Peer to peer/former student experiences
  - Idea exchange
- Make reflection meaningful and regular
- Ego check – it’s about more than “you”
  - Ripple effect/impact
- Relationship building -> importance
- Seize opportunities

## **Instructor challenges**

- Student “no-shows”
- Community partner “0” capacity
- Meaningful work/experiences
- Relationship building
- Real world experiences/value
- Community disconnect
- Transportation issues
- Language differences
- Time
- Quality work
- Classroom dynamics/classroom power and privilege
- Curriculum development
- Finding the match
- Department mental support
- Student require vs. optional
- Liability
- Project size (time constraints for project)

## **Instructor Strategies**

- Reframing attendance policies (with community partner) to include service
- Groups go to service opportunities (accountability)
- Are there ways to serve that don’t require going on site?
- Choices for service
- Learn institutional resources – like zipcars, etc – ahead of time
- How can you work SL into other relationships?
  - Integrate into service, research
- Reframe SL into terms the department likes: university service, interdisciplinary
- TA’s
- “community as text”
- Create long term communication between instructor and community partner
- Help students connect through ideas, service, reflection
- Emphasize real world applicability to students
- Clear expectations for student behavior on site
- Don’t over plan the class
- Have previous students describe class to new students
- Invite partners to class
- Have early conversations/reflections on identity, privilege, power
- Link to the SL-VCU website (for curriculum development)
- Consider long term and short term goals
  - Multi semester