



Preparing Students for Meaningful Service

Thorough orientation of students to the responsibilities and issues related to service and to the community organization(s) is essential to a well-orchestrated service-learning course. Students may be introduced to people, issues, and communities with whom they are unfamiliar; they may be asked to confront and address previous stereotypes and biases. Good intentions alone are not enough to ensure that students approach new environments with respect and courtesy for those with whom they may come into contact. **Preparation should include an orientation to the site, volunteer expectations, and knowledge about the issue(s) students will encounter onsite.**

Preparation for a service-learning experience begins in the classroom. Prior to the first visit to an agency/school, in-class discussions should focus on:

Course expectations

Clearly explain to the students the unique features of a service-learning course and how the service component fits into the course expectations.

Issues of diversity and respect

Helping students gain a better appreciation for differences and treating people who are different from themselves with respect is an important aspect of service-learning courses.

Key components of service-learning relationships

Components of successful relationships with community partners include respect, reciprocity, mutuality, and empowerment.

Confidentiality

Students might learn sensitive information about the community partners with whom they are serving. It is important to discuss the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of this information. Students should be encouraged to discuss confidentiality policies with their service supervisors, if they are not discussed at the onsite orientation.

Commitment/accountability

It is important that students understand the nature of their commitment to the community partner. Students should be made aware that the community partners rely on students' service hours to help meet their needs. Students should be reminded that they must be dependable and provide the community partner with sufficient notice if they will not be able to serve during their scheduled time.

It is important to prepare students with the "common sense" information (i.e., dress, attitude) they will need to enter the service-learning site and make a positive impact.
~ Amie Wolf, Senior Lecturer, English

Onsite orientation is as important as in-class preparation. Community partners should be encouraged to address the following during onsite orientations:

- Agency history, mission, and purpose
- Staff and volunteer roles and schedules
- Explanation of populations served and relevant issues
- Agency policies and safety considerations
- Issues of confidentiality
- Emergency procedures
- Agency protocol in common situations (i.e., in dealing with conflict, making suggestions, addressing concerns)

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