

Simmons

UNIVERSITY

Community-Based and Service-Learning Guide

Simmons Center for Community
Engagement

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INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AT SIMMONS

The Center for Community Engagement: Our Mission and Practice

For more than 100 years, Simmons has inspired its students to combine learning with action for a more just and equitable world. Today, Simmons' Center for Community Engagement (CCE) takes the lead in advancing this commitment to visionary education and civic engagement. Our partnerships with over 60 community-based organizations have empowered women and girls, provided tutoring and mentoring to K-12 schools, supported public health, and improved libraries and literacy. Through all of this work we endeavor to create relationships based on collaboration and cultural humility, while recognizing the role that white supremacy, settler colonialism, and patriarchy have played in shaping academic-community relations.

While we offer many co-curricular opportunities to engage with the Greater Boston community, our main curricular opportunities occur through service-learning. The CCE supports community-based learning at Simmons, working with faculty to build community connections and ensure high quality, high impact learning opportunities for students; these opportunities, in support the communities in which we are embedded with resources and services. This guide is intended to orient faculty to Simmons's approach to community-based learning, the resources the Center for Community Engagement can provide to faculty who incorporate community into their classroom, and our policies and procedures for supporting service-learning courses.

Community-Based and Service-Learning at Simmons University

Community-Based Learning is an umbrella term for learning through curricular and co-curricular opportunities that directly engages with community. Community-Based Learning at Simmons develops students' academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community through learning experiences with communities in greater Boston and beyond. Service-Learning is a teaching method that combines academic instruction with service to a community that is meaningful and relevant to all parties.

In The Center for Community Engagement, we recognize and support a breadth of community-based learning approaches that instructors might take. This includes more traditional service opportunities, but also other approaches such as civic engagement initiatives, co-learning with community members, community tours, etc. We have built some formal structures around service-learning courses, which much of this guide discusses, but are also here to support this range of community-based approaches. Through our work we have strong relationships with many community partners and are here to help build new partnerships where needed.

Our Approach to Community-Based Learning

In The Center for Community Engagement, we believe that at its best community-based learning is a high-impact pedagogy which can enhance student learning while providing tangible benefits to communities. For community-based learning to be effective in this manner, we emphasize the following practices:

- **Course Integration with Quality Reflection Opportunities:** Community Engagement should be fully integrated with course learning objectives. Students should have an opportunity for quality reflection on their community engagement experience and how that experience connects to the course concepts.
- **Critical Service-Learning Rooted in Equity and Inclusion:** Any community-based learning experience should consider the social context in which it occurs and take into account the power relationships in which the service-learning experience is embedded. At Simmons, we work to ensure that a critical approach to

service-learning includes attention to issues of equity and inclusion that arise in both the classroom and the broader community.

- Mutually Beneficial Community Partnerships: Partnerships should be beneficial to the partners as well as the students. Communities should be approached from an asset-based rather than a need-based perspective, and students should understand their own identities in relation to the communities they are working in/with.

Instructors considering this pedagogy must decide if work with a community can be integrated into the learning objectives of their course meaningfully and if they have the commitment and resources to work with community as a part of their practice.

Community-based learning can leave a lasting impact on you, your students, and our community partners, but the challenges to incorporating community-based learning in your course are real as are the benefits. The Center for Community Engagement can work through challenges with you and assist you in incorporating service-learning or other community-based opportunities into your course – whether as a central element of your course design, or a smaller component. The policies, procedures, and resources that support high quality community-based learning are outlined in this guide.

Many instructors choose to incorporate community and service-learning into their course from a personal commitment to social justice. Community-based learning in and of itself does not necessarily advance social justice, but it is possible to incorporate community-based learning into a course in a way that does work towards social justice, however you envision it. Engagement with community can provide an excellent opportunity to discuss questions of social justice across disciplines with your students, and to help move the work of community organizations committed to social justice forward. The Center for Community Engagement can work with you to help think about how principals of social justice may operate in your course.

Further Reading: Introductions to and Critical Perspectives on Service-Learning

*starred items are available in the Center for Community Engagement, C230B

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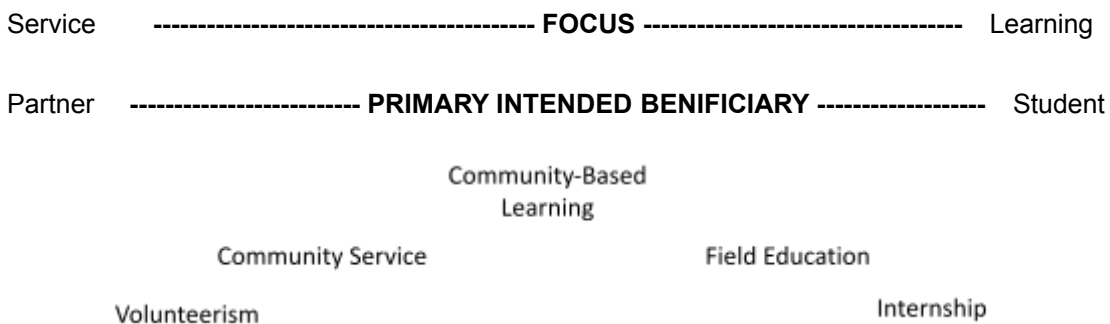
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CORE PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AT SIMMONS

Three key principles guide our approach to community-based learning at Simmons: (1) strong course integration with opportunities for quality reflection, (2) critical service-learning rooted in principles of equity and inclusion, and (3) mutually beneficial community-based partnerships. Each of these principles is elaborated on below, with more resources at the end of this section.

Integrating Service-Learning into Your Course

Both the promise and the challenge of community-based learning is to balance the needs of community partners and the needs of the classroom in a mutually beneficial manner. This makes community-based learning distinct from other forms of community engagement which place a greater emphasis on either service or learning. Academic community-based learning, wherein student community engagement is integrated into an academic course, utilizes community-based experience as a course “text” for both academic and civic learning. As such, planning a community-based learning course is different than traditional course development because service, reflection, and evaluation elements must be integrated into the course in a specific way.



The Center for Community Engagement is available for consultation in course design and can provide resources on a variety of topics related to utilizing community-based learning as a component of your course. Effective community-based learning courses fully integrate community engagement activities into the course, prepare students for service, and provide regular opportunities for reflection.

Best Practices for Developing a Service-Learning Course: 8 Key Points

(Adapted from Elon University)

1. What are the learning outcomes for the course? Which of these outcomes can be achieved through the service-learning component and what evidence would prove they were achieved?

2. What community projects or research might help achieve the learning outcome(s)? Think in terms of specific types of service settings (e.g. agencies) as well as what students might do in these settings.
3. How could the service-learning component tie directly to the course content (e.g. professional ethics, context of the profession within the larger society/community, issues in the discipline, public issues?)
4. What assignments could you develop to: a) help students connect their service to the course content; b) increase the chance that all students achieve the learning outcomes; c) maximize learning from the service experience? Possibilities include reflective papers, readings, discussion, presentations, multimedia project, etc.
5. What other syllabus adjustments would be needed to accommodate the service-learning component? Could any assignments be abbreviated/alterd if learning objectives are met through service-learning?
6. What communication would be helpful with community partners? What feedback, if any, might you solicit from service sites about students' performance?
7. What primary strategies could you use to assist students to prepare for and reflect on the service-learning aspect of the course?
8. How might you evaluate student learning in the service-learning project, focusing particularly on evaluating learning rather than service?

Service-Learning courses at Simmons tend to take one of two forms:

Placement-Based Service-Learning

In placement-based courses, students volunteer in organizations in Boston's communities, and then connect their experiences in those volunteer opportunities to their course work through reflections and other assignments. Students generally seek out their own volunteer opportunities with community partners that fit with the learning objectives of their course. The Center for Community Engagement maintains a list of possible opportunities for students and can help create a tailored list to fit your course. Often, faculty require a commitment of at least 20 hours or more during the semester. Some examples of Placement Based Service-Learning:

- A student in “Introduction to Social Work and Welfare” volunteers with Jumpstart, and connects their work with preschoolers to course concepts through regular in-class reflections.
- Students in a learning community volunteer with a local re-entry program and apply their experiences there to understanding the impact of the war on drugs.

Project Based Service-Learning

With embedded or project-based service learning, students complete projects for one or more community organizations which are integrated into the class and tailored to the assets and needs of the specific organization(s), the instructor’s learning objectives, and the students in the class. The Center for Community Engagement works with faculty and students to build partnerships, which may extend over multiple semesters. These projects can often require 20 – 60 hours of hours from students on projects.

Some examples of Project Based Service-Learning:

- A group of students learning about physical therapy create chair yoga workouts for a local elder community home.
- Management students work together to develop recommendations for expansion for a local non-profit organization.

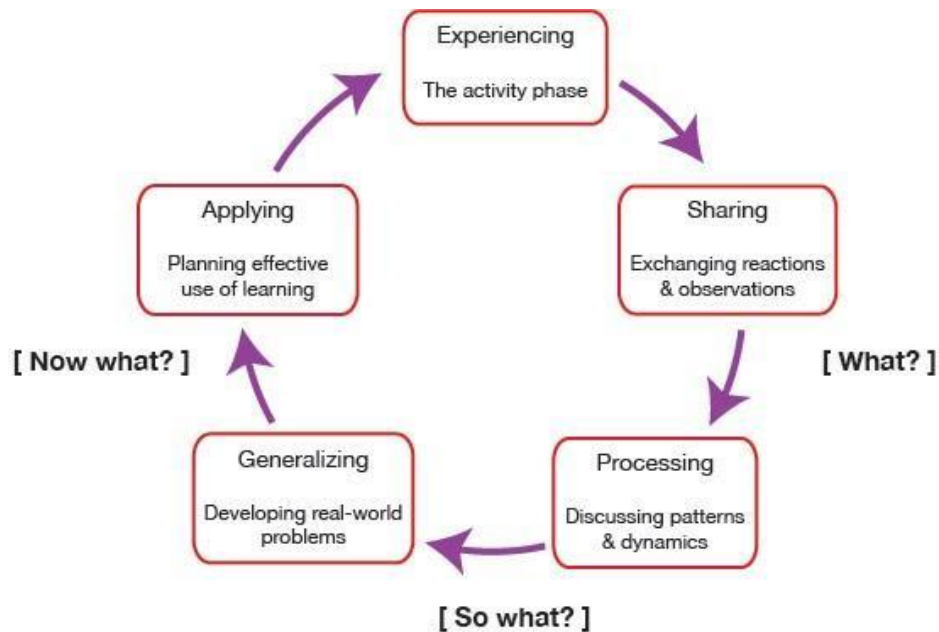
Creating Space for Reflection

“Students need to be pushed to dig deeper in their thinking/reflection on the experience, beyond how they feel or what they are doing or the charitable motivations behind what they’re doing to the ‘civic’ or ‘public’ dimensions of the work. The most important component is critical ‘reflection’” – *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum*

Reflection is one of the most important components of community-based learning. It allows students to draw out the most meaningful and memorable aspects of their experience and connect them with your course work, as well as personal and civic discoveries. Some common methods of reflection include: class discussion, journals, presentations, reaction papers, integrative papers, and group reflection sessions.

The various forms of reflection in your course should provide opportunities throughout the semester for students to think at all 3 of the questions, What? So What? Now What? It is

crucial that students have structured opportunities to address all 3 stages of thought. Only when students reach the Now What? stage can they truly convert their experiences into learning and growth, and they will not necessarily reach this stage without your guidance.



(adapted from Mathos, Tullier, and Nevalga, 2010)

WHAT? (Description)

- What happened, who was involved, and what were my own initial reactions and perspectives?

SO WHAT? (Interpretation)

- What impact did the engagement have on the community and on me? What lessons did I learn/ what perspectives did I gain?
- What larger themes, root causes, and social/political context help me understand the community issues I am observing/helping to address during service?
- How do community-based experiences and course material connect to and inform each other?
- What gaps in my understanding of course material or in my skills have I discovered while serving?

NOW WHAT? (decision/action)

- What's my action plan/next steps?

- What can I do differently to improve my service?
- How will my experience inform my future choices?
- How can I apply my new learning/perspective to other situations?
- How can I address the gaps in my understanding and skills I have discovered?

What can other people/institutions do differently to address these community issues

CCE has multiple resources for encouraging critical reflection and thoughtfully structuring reflection assignments. Contact us for more information.

Critical Service – Learning Rooted in Principles of Equity and Inclusion

As defined by Tania Mitchell (2008), a critical service-learning approach directly address issues of power and inequality as a component of any service-learning experience.

Three elements distinguish critical service-learning from its more traditional counter-part: working to redistribute power amongst all participants in the service-learning relationship, developing authentic relationships in the classroom and in the community, and working from a social change perspective. A critical approach to service-learning invites us and our students to consider the micro- and macro-dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. We encourage faculty members to consider the following issues as they design their service-learning class:

1. Micro: What are the various identities in the classroom? How might you and your students have different beliefs and assumptions about the very meaning and nature of “service” based on your backgrounds? How might your students relate to the service experiences differently based on their own privilege/marginalization? If you will be working with a marginalized population, may some of your own students also have experienced similar marginalization? What spaces will you be sending your students to? In what ways may some students’ privilege ease their ability to be in those spaces? In what ways may some students experience marginalization within those spaces? How will all of this be addressed in the classroom, before you even enter the community? How will you discourage saviorism and prepare your students to interact across difference?

2. Meso: What is the local context for the service experience? What do your students need to know about that local context to enter it respectfully? What is the context of the organization you are working with? Is their orientation towards charity or justice? How does your work with an organization or group fit into the larger set of relationships at Simmons? Of universities and communities in the Boston area?

2. Macro: What issues of power, privilege, and oppression does this service experience evoke? How will you help your students understand this broad context? How will you invite them to examine their own assumptions and biases as they consider the social context? How will you engage them in a social change/justice framework?

Any service-learning experience we engage with will have its own context of (in)justice and its own tensions around being beneficial to others and reinforcing unjust power relations. Service-learning is an opportunity for us to address these tensions head on and model for our students how to engage issues of power, privilege, and oppression in a complex social world. CCE encourages you to consider these questions and is also available to help you think about how to address them.

Preparing Students for Learning

Many students have done community service and are familiar with traditional service opportunities; however, service-learning is often a new concept for students. Students need to understand how to link service and education. Preparation is critical for students to examine their expectations and assumptions as well as understand how their experience will shape their educational goals. Simple preparation activities can enrich your students' service-learning experience and serve as a springboard for future reflection.

Suggested preparation:

- Explain your philosophy for service learning and/or community engagement. Have students think critically about service and the role they will be playing.
- Encourage students to engage in their work with humility as learners and promote an asset-based perspective on community. Be attuned to a savior

mentality that some students may approach this work from and actively discourage this.

- Take students on a tour of the organization or have a representative speak about the agency's history, mission, and goals.
- Provide readings to students about the population they will be serving.
- Conduct an "experience inventory" to assess the skills and knowledge that each student brings to the project, as well as prior experiences your students may have in the community or with the organization.
- Use journaling, discussion, or drawing to have students express their assumptions and expectations about the project.
- Reflect on social justice issues related to the community they will encounter.

The Center for Community Engagement is available to present on service and community-based learning in your course. Topics include, but are not limited to, defining service-learning, making the most out of the community-based learning experiences and approaching community and learning in a thoughtful and critical manner. Please contact them at the end of the semester before you teach your course to set up a time.

Mutually Beneficial Community Partnerships

The Center for Community Engagement has partnerships with over 60 community agencies through our service-learning courses, student-led programs, and other institutional partners. The contact between students and our community partners is the heart of everything we do. We strive to build authentic partnerships which maintain awareness of the multiple needs of all stakeholders involved. We work closely with instructors to nurture strong and mutually beneficial relationships, and to ensure that Simmons University students are honoring our community commitments. This doesn't mean that problems will never arise, but it does mean we will be ready to work through them when they do. We thus ask instructors to consider the following effective practices, which we strive to institute in CCE:

Effective Practices for working with Partners and Establishing Positive Community Connections:

- Research organization history, mission, and related social issues. Learn about the assets of the organization and the communities it serves and relate this to your students.
- Make your learning objectives and expectations of students very clear to your partners. Make sure they have a copy of the syllabus and any relevant assignments.
- Be open to indirect service projects that may supply real value to community organizations, such as data entry, fundraising and phone banks. Consider how you can help students see the value of service that provides support to community vs. direct contact with people.
- Take care to “do no harm”. The notion of a community laboratory perpetuates an attitude of institutional superiority. Make sure that partners know that working/ not working with you won’t threaten their relationship to the university.
- Invite community partners to be part of reflections, presentations, and related activities.
- Agree on method of ongoing communication that works best for all partners. Communicate regularly.
- Make sure you have discussed and agreed upon issues of information sharing and confidentiality with your partner.
- Use service-learning agreements or memoranda of understanding to outline expectations agreed upon by the student, faculty member, and community partner.
- Work towards a partnership based on shared goals, measurable outcomes, and open communication.

Further Reading: Course Design, Equity, and Partnerships

*starred items are available in The Center for Community Engagement, C230B

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Discipline-based resources available

WORKING WITH SIMMONS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: POLICIES AND RESOURCES

The Center for Community Engagement offers support to students, instructors, and our community partners throughout their service learning experience. To learn more about the policies and resources outlined here contact the Center for Community Engagement, Meghan Doran:

Meghan.doran2@simmons.edu

Ext. 2235

Center for Community Engagement, C230B

Overview: Roles and Responsibilities

Instructor Roles and Responsibilities:

- Submit Service Learning Designation form to the Center for Community Engagement in the semester before you plan to teach a course with a service-learning component;
- Utilize effective practices for community-based learning in course design as laid out in this guide and in the literature;
- Clearly communicate course deliverables and timelines to community partners;
- Share syllabi with CCE and community partners;
- Distribute and collect student service-learning contracts and return to CCE when applicable;
- Be available to partners for concerns and questions;
- Invite partners to attend final presentations if applicable;

The Center for Community Engagement Responsibilities

- Support faculty in securing partnerships for community-based learning courses;
- Provide consultations and resources for course development, engaging effective practices from the literature on community-based learning
- Support community partners in communicating feedback to faculty;
- Administer faculty fund for service-learning

- Administer evaluations to community partners and students;
- Support community partners in identifying additional opportunities to partner and for professional development.

Service-Learning Designation

A course which has a required service component can now be designated as a Service-Learning course in AARC. This allows students to search for courses that involve service-learning and helps students know ahead of time that the course will require service. To designate a course as service-learning, instructors should complete the Service-Learning Designation the first time they plan to teach the course.

Criteria for a Service-Learning course:

- Include community-based learning that is relevant to course content; Learning objectives should be clearly stated
- Include structured reflection that enhances students' understanding of connections between course content and service;
- Take into account issues of equity and inclusion in their design
- Reflect the needs of the community and include projects created in collaboration with community partners;
- Service-Learning contracts in which faculty, students and community supervisors make a clear commitment are strongly encouraged.
- Must be willing to participate in our course evaluation with students and partners; must be willing to share details on partnership with CCE and to share the course syllabus
- For Project-Based Courses: The service project offers benefits beyond the class members. Projects should reflect the needs of the community and be created in collaboration with community partners.
- For Placement-Based Courses: Instructors should be clear about what volunteer placements will/will not align with course content and how many hours will be required. Most courses require anywhere from 20 – 40 service hours.

Why designate Service-Learning courses?

- o Identify courses that meet service-learning criteria in the schedule of the classes:
- o Enable students with an interest in community-based learning to identify courses that offer them this opportunity;
- o Bring greater visibility to the practice of service-learning at Simmons and allow CCE to better track and document the benefits of this pedagogy to students, the community, and the faculty;
- o Be eligible to apply for Faculty Service-Learning Funds distributed by CCE
- o Allow CCE to better support, provide training, and share opportunities with faculty and community partners;
- o Approved service-learning designation form required for UCC application.

The Service-Learning Designation form and all supporting documents should be sent to the Center for Community Engagement at the latest by **February 19th** for Fall courses and **September 18th** for Spring courses. For new undergraduate courses, a signed copy of this form should be provided to the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee as a part of the course approval process. Pre-existing undergraduate courses that are adding a service-learning component should also seek approval from the UCC. For graduate courses, faculty should consult their curriculum committee to discuss approval processes.

Developing Community Partnerships

CCE works with instructors to identify existing partners that may be a good fit for their course, to leverage instructor connections as partners, and to identify new partners. In developing partnerships, CCE has several resources available upon request:

Course Proposal Form

This form is used to solicit proposals from community organizations for project-based courses. CCE maintains a template which instructors should edit to reflect the course objectives. The Center for Community Engagement will circulate the call for proposals to existing partners and networks.

Volunteer Opportunities List

Typically for placement-based service-learning courses, students seek out their own volunteer placements. CCE maintains a list of possible placements which contains basic information about the opportunities, time commitments, and contact information for a wide variety of volunteer opportunities across the Boston area. The Center for Community Engagement can work with you to tailor this list to your course needs.

Student-Instructor-Partner Contracts

Clear agreements on commitments and deliverables are a cornerstone of effective service-learning practice. Thus, CCE strongly encourages instructors to utilize contracts or other forms of written agreement as a practice of clear communication between all stakeholders. CCE maintains templates for contracts that can be used for individual placements and projects as well as group projects. Contracts can be sent directly by students to the Center for Community Engagement for tracking purposes

Faculty Fund

The Faculty Fund for Service-Learning supports faculty to fully integrate service-learning into their courses. This fund should be used to directly enhance the quality of the service-learning project. Any faculty member teaching a service-learning designated course on the undergraduate or graduate level may apply for up to \$300 per semester. Funds may be requested for expenses incurred by faculty members or students enrolled in the course during the planning, implementation, or celebration stages of the project.

To be eligible for funds, the instructor must have completed the Service-Learning Designation form, as well as provided all necessary documents for the semester in which they are applying. An End of Project Report may also be requested.

Faculty Fund applications will be considered throughout the semester on a rolling, first-come, first-served basis. Applications will be reviewed at least two weeks after the

submission of all application material. Faculty will be notified by the 4th week after submitting their applications. Applications for service-learning funds must be submitted by November 15th for fall semester projects and March 15th for spring semester projects.

Evaluations

In an effort to continuously monitor and improve our work, The Center for Community Engagement looks to both students and community partners to evaluate their community-based learning experience. This feedback provides valuable information for both instructors and CCE as we continue to work together.

CCE has online surveys which it administers directly to students and partners for service-learning designated courses at the end of each semester. To administer these evaluations, we ask that you keep us apprised of your community partners and their contact information, and any changes that may occur throughout the semester. We will provide you a report on the student and partner data after the close of the semester. If you'd like to see the evaluation, please contact the Center for Community Engagement. Evaluations can be tailored to your course.