Service-Learning Guide
Simmons Community Engagement
in the Scott/Ross Center

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INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE-LEARNING AT SIMMONS

Simmons Community Engagement: Our Mission and Practice

For more than 100 years, Simmons College has inspired its students to combine learning with action for a more just and equitable world. Today, Simmons Community Engagement (SCE) takes the lead in advancing this commitment to visionary education and civic engagement. Our long-term partnerships with over 60 community-based organizations have influenced social welfare reform, improved K-12 schools, established public health programs, supported libraries and literacy, and empowered women and girls. Whether it's tackling social justice issues such as homelessness and hunger, mentoring youth, or becoming a pen pal to a middle-school student, we're proud to offer our entire campus a variety of ways to get involved and make a difference in our community.

While we offer many co-curricular opportunities to engage with the Greater Boston community, our main curricular opportunities occur through service-learning. The Assistant Director for Service-Learning supports service-learning at Simmons, working with faculty to build community connections and ensure high quality, high impact learning opportunities for students; these opportunities, in turn, provide services and bring additional resources to the communities in which we are embedded. This guide is intended to orient faculty to Simmons’s approach to service-learning, the resources Simmons Community Engagement can provide to faculty who incorporate service-learning, and our policies and procedures for supporting service-learning courses.
Service-Learning at Simmons College

Service-Learning is a teaching method that combines academic instruction with service to a community that is meaningful and relevant to all parties. Service-learning courses develop students’ academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community through organized community work responsive to local needs. (adapted from Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges and Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning).

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

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. Simmons 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 connect their work with preschoolers to course concepts through regular in-class reflections.
- A nursing student in “Health Care Policy: Community Advocacy and Leadership” volunteers at Friendship works to interact with the elderly outside of a healthcare setting. They then use their experiences to formulate a final paper on a social policy issue.

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 faculty’s learning objectives, and the students in the class. Simmons 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 workout for a local elder community home
- Management students work together to develop recommendations for expansion for a local non-profit organization.

Our Approach to Service-Learning

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

- Course Integration: Service should be fully integrated with course learning objectives.
- Community Relationships: 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.
- Quality Reflection: Students should have an opportunity for quality reflection on their service experience and how that service connects to the course concepts.

Simmons Community Engagement also envisions service-learning as having the potential to support the principles of social justice through increasing equity and inclusion in our city and beyond. We
work with instructors interested in service-learning as a tool for social justice to realize this full potential.

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

*starred items are available in the Scott/Ross Center for Community Service, MCB E304
**starred items are available through the Beatley Library


SHOULD I INCORPORATE SERVICE-LEARNING INTO MY COURSE?

Simmons Community Engagement is committed to service-learning as a high impact pedagogy which can benefit students, instructors and communities. This does not mean that service-learning will be the right fit for every course or every instructor, or that it will always be easy. Instructors considering this pedagogy must decide if service-learning can be integrated into the learning objectives of their course meaningfully and if they have the commitment and resources to take on service-learning as a part of their practice.

Why teach a Service-Learning course at Simmons?
The challenges to incorporating service-learning in your course are real as are the benefits. Service-learning can leave a lasting impact on you, your students, and our community partners. Simmons Community Engagement can work through these challenges with you and assist you in incorporating service-learning 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 service-learning are outlined in this guide.

Many instructors choose to incorporate service-learning into their course from a personal commitment to social justice. Service-learning in and of itself does not necessarily advance social justice, but it is possible to incorporate service-learning into a course in a way that does work towards social justice, however you envision it. Service-learning 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. Simmons Community Engagement can work with you to help think about how principals of social justice may operate in your service-learning course.
Benefits to Service-Learning
Consider these benefits to the multiple stakeholders in service-learning:

For STUDENTS
• Enhance understanding of course concepts
• Gain hands-on experience in a potential career field
• Develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills
• Explore and act on values and beliefs; grow understanding of and critical thinking about social justice
• Connect to Boston’s communities; grow understanding of diverse cultures and communities
• Develop or enhance skills related to engagement, especially in the areas of communication, collaboration, and leadership
• Connect with professionals and community members; grow a professional network
• Increase capacity for civic engagement/democratic participation

For INSTRUCTORS
• Promote students’ active learning; engage students with different learning styles
• Add new insights and dimensions to class discussions; increase class engagement
• Boost course enrollment by attracting highly motivated and engaged students
• Foster relationships with Boston-area community organizations, which can open other opportunities for collaborative work
• Build new avenues for research and publication
• Gain firsthand knowledge of community issues and get more involved in those issues

For COMMUNITY PARTNERS
• Gain additional human resources needed to achieve organizational goals
• Strategize about and get assistance on issues and projects that need further attention within the organization
• Inject new energy, enthusiasm, and perspectives into the organization's work
• Grow the organization’s volunteer pool: service-learning students will share their experiences with friends and classmates
• Educate students/youth about community issues; correct any misperceptions
• Network with colleagues in other organizations and agencies
• Identify and access other university resources; build relationships with Simmons faculty, students, and staff

(benefits adapted from University of Minnesota; www.servicelearning.umn.edu)

**Challenges to Service-Learning**

While the benefits of Service-Learning are many, we recognize that this approach is not without challenges, which is why Simmons Community Engagement has staff dedicated to service-learning support. Challenges participants in service-learning encounter may include:

• **TIME**: Time is a major constraint for all stakeholders (instructors, students, and community organizations) involved in service-learning. Time commitments must be carefully thought through for each participant as service-learning projects are designed.

• **RESOURCES**: In addition to time, other resources may be needed to successfully engage in service-learning, such as money for travel for students or staffing allocations in community organizations.

• **CAPACITY**: Teaching and learning through service is a skill that does not necessarily come automatically for faculty, students, or community partners. Developing this capacity requires skill, patience, and commitment from all parties involved.

• **INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS**: Service-learning introduces interpersonal dynamics to the classroom which aren’t necessarily present with other pedagogical approaches. Students, faculty, and partners all need clear communication to achieve their own ends in a mutually beneficial way.

• **LEARNING GOALS**: Finally, service-learning may not always align with learning goals and can even work against them. Faculty often send students into communities to see social issues as they play out in the real world, but individual engagement can obscure the social/structural aspects of social problems. Community partners may have a different perspective on the social issue than faculty, or become frustrated when students approach community work as ‘saviors’ rather than learners.
Simmons Community Engagement can help address these challenges. We can share some of the burden of time and provide additional resources, such as our faculty fund. We can help you develop your capacity for teaching a service-learning course and collaborate with you on course development. Finally, we can manage relationships over the long-term and address conflicts as they arise so that you, your students, and our partners have a positive and beneficial experience with service-learning. The remainder of this guide outlines the policies and procedures we have in place to help maximize the benefits of service-learning at Simmons College.

**Further Reading: Impacts of Service-Learning**

*starred items are available in the Scott/Ross Center for Community Service, MCB E304
**starred items are available through the Beatley Library


WORKING WITH SIMMONS
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:
POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Simmons 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 Assistant Director for Service-Learning, Meghan Doran:

Meghan.doran2@simmons.edu
Ext. 2235
Simmons Community Engagement, MCB E304

Overview: Roles and Responsibilities
Instructor Roles and Responsibilities:

• Submit Service Learning Designation form to the Assistant Director for Service-Learning in the semester before you plan to teach a course with a service-learning component;
• Utilize effective practices for service-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 SCE and community partners;
• Distribute and collect student service-learning contracts and return to SCE;
• Be available to partners for concerns and questions;
• Invite partners to attend final presentations if applicable;
• Administer service-learning course evaluation to students at the close of the course.

Simmons Community Engagement Responsibilities

• Support faculty in securing partnerships for service-learning courses;
• Provide consultations and resources for course development, engaging effective practices from the literature on service-learning
• Support community partners in communicating feedback to faculty;
• Administer faculty fund for service-learning
• Administer evaluations to community partners;
• Provide end of course reports for faculty members;
• 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 (provided by the Assistant-Director of Service-Learning) form each time they plan to teach the course.

Criteria for a Service-Learning course:

- The service that students will engage in is relevant to course content.
- 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.
- Service-Learning contracts in which faculty, students and community supervisors make a clear commitment are strongly encouraged.
- Some portion of the course should be committed to the service project through class discussion, reflections, and/or other assignments.
- The course should require students evaluate the service-learning experience

Course Designation:

- Enables students with an interest in community-based learning to identify courses that offer them this opportunity;
- Allows students to understand course and time commitments prior to enrolling in a service-learning course;
- Brings greater visibility to the practice of service-learning at Simmons and allows us to better document the benefits of this pedagogy to students, the community, and the faculty;
- Is an eligibility criterion to apply for Faculty Service-Learning Funds distributed by Simmons Community Engagement;
- Allows Simmons Community Engagement to better support, provide training, and share opportunities with faculty and community partners;
• Allows Simmons Community Engagement to track such courses and the faculty and students who engage in Service-Learning for reporting purposes.

The Service-Learning Designation form and all supporting documents should be sent to the Assistant Director for Service-Learning by **March 1st** for Fall courses and **October 1st** for Spring courses.

**Developing Community Partnerships**

Simmons 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 College 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 SCE:

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

• Meet organizations’ representatives at their office when possible. Note details on location, transportation, and parking that will be pertinent to your students.
• Ask organization staff how what you have to offer might be useful to them.
• 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.
• Help students shift their perception of community members as deficient and needy to possessing valuable and desirable strengths and insights – as assets to their communities.
• Be open to indirect service projects. 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.
• Invite community partners to be part of reflections, presentations, and related activities.
• Agree on method of ongoing communication that works best for all partners.
• 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, measureable outcomes, and open communication.

SCE 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, SCE has several resources available upon request from the Assistant Director for Service-Learning:

Course Proposal Form
This form is used to solicit proposals from community organizations for project-based service-learning courses. SCE maintains a template which instructors should edit to reflect the course objectives. The Assistant-Director for Service-Learning 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. SCE 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 Assistant Director for Service-Learning 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, SCE strongly encourages instructors to utilize contracts or other forms of written agreement as a practice of clear communication between all stakeholders. SCE 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 Assistant Director for Service-Learning for tracking purposes.

Time Sheets
SCE maintains templates for student time sheets for placement-based courses requiring a certain number of hours.
Course Design

The Assistant Director for Service-Learning is available for consultation in course design and can provide resources on a variety of topics related to utilizing service-learning as a component of your course. Effective service-learning courses fully integrate service 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/ altered 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?

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. Have students think critically about service and the role they will be playing.
- Discourage students from entering the community as ‘saviors’ and encourage them to engage in their work with humility as learners. Help them see Boston’s communities from an asset-based perspective rather than from a deficit model.
- 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.
- 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 Assistant Director for Service-Learning is available to present on service-learning in your course. Topics include, but are not limited to, defining service-learning, making the most out of the service-learning experience and approaching service-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.

**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 service-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.

**WHAT?** (Description)
- What happened, who was involved, and what were my own initial reactions and perspectives?

**SO WHAT?** (Interpretation)
- What impact did the service 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 service 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 while serving?
- What can other people/institutions do differently to address these community issues?

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 $500 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, Simmons Community Engagement looks to both students and community partners to evaluate their service-learning experience. This feedback provides valuable information for both instructors and SCE as we continue to work together.

Student Evaluations

We ask that faculty administer evaluations to students near the end of each semester. Faculty may use their own evaluations or use the template created by SCE. The SCE template can be
tailored to meet the needs of your course and can be administered in class on paper or through a Google form. If you use the SCE form, we will provide you a report on the student data after the close of the semester. If you use your own evaluation, we ask that you share the results with us.

**Partner Evaluations**
SCE has an online survey which it administers directly to partners for each Service-Learning course 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 partner data after the close of the semester. If you’d like to see the evaluation, please contact the Assistant Director for Service-Learning.

**Further Reading: Community Partnerships and Course Design**


