1. Definition and Overview

Service learning (SL), also known as community-based learning, combines meaningful community projects with rigorous course content to create an experiential learning environment that enriches students’ understandings of the complexities, joys, and opportunities of civic engagement.

The idea is to provide students with direct experiences with the issues they are studying, including an emphasis on identifying needs, assets, and solutions with community partners. The best service learning courses emphasize both student learning and community needs, thus creating partnerships of mutual benefit.

In these programs, students apply what they are learning in the classroom to real-world settings, reflect in the classroom on their service work, and then produce scholarship that combines traditional academic learning with community-based experiences.

2. Best-Practices Guidelines

The minimum standard features of a SL-intensive course, according to national best practices, are as follows:

- **Course-Embedded**: The service experience is embedded in a credit-bearing course.
- **Integrated**: The service experience is clearly and explicitly integrated into the course, included in the course learning outcomes, list of assignments/activities, grading, and, as appropriate, readings, student presentations, and other assignments.
- **Partnered and Consultative**: The service experience addresses a genuine community need and should be designed in collaboration with community partners, thus exemplifying reciprocal university/community relationships.
- **Organized and Sustained**: The service experience is meaningful and ongoing. That is, the service-learning should not be a one-off event or episodic volunteer program but part of a rigorous, community-based project.
In regards to the second of these, one or more assignments should be tailored to integrate the service work into the fabric of the course. For example, students can be asked to reflect on the relationship between their community-based work and the course content by writing personal “think-piece” journals, use course content to write a case study about the specific location of community-based work, conduct historical research into the topic of their choosing, use their community-based experiences and course content to analyze relevant government policies, or prepare public presentations (oral, poetic, musical, staged, or videoed) depicting their experiences. The idea is to be creative about incorporating best pedagogical practices while merging scholarship and civic engagement.

3. Learning Outcomes for Service Learning

National best practices recommend that SL-intensive courses deliver the learning of one or more of the following AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes, chosen by the instructor as appropriate to the course:

- Civic Engagement
- Creative Thinking
- Intercultural Knowledge and Competence
- Oral Communication
- Written Communication
- Teamwork

Ideally, SL-intensive course syllabi will reference and use the VALUE Rubrics for one or more of these ELOs (linked above) and integrate these general outcomes into the discipline-specific learning outcomes for the course. The ELO should be expressed in the terms of that discipline or profession and serve the delivery of disciplinary knowledge and skills.

This concludes the abbreviated Service Learning best-practices guidelines document. The complete version additionally includes a Suggested Resources or references section and a Sample Courses section.
4. Suggested Resources


Engaged Faculty Institute Curriculum: For an excellent set of resources documenting best practices for service learning, please see the Engaged Faculty Institute Curriculum information available at https://ccph.memberclicks.net/efi-units. The “Resources” tab accessible at the website contains links to wonderful materials regarding community-based research, teaching, and engagement.


From the 2015 CDS annual conference:

5. Sample Service Learning Courses at CU Denver

COMM 4040, “Communication, Prisons, and Social Justice”—addresses the prison-industrial complex and issues of race, class, gender, and power, while enabling students to work as tutors in Denver-area prisons and jails or with other community groups dedicated to ending mass-incarceration.
COMM 4051, “Advanced Strategic Communication”—Students develop a comprehensive strategic communication plan for a Denver-based nonprofit organization. The course involves rigorous research, in-depth discussion, and practical, hands-on strategic planning, writing, and digital production activities.

PUAD 5115, “Effective Grant Writing for Nonprofit and Public Sector Managers”—This course is designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to perform one of the most critical functions for any public or nonprofit sector agency today: gaining funds through proposals. Students learn how to locate and analyze funding opportunities through public and private funders and how to research, plan and write effective and competitive proposals.