Service Learning at the University of Colorado Denver

University of Colorado Denver 2020 Vision
By 2020, the university will be a leading public university with a global reputation for excellence in learning, research and creativity, community engagement and clinical care.

Service Learning Data
Per NSSE data from 2013, service learning is the most often participated in high impact practice among CU Denver first-year and senior students. However, the proportion of CU Denver seniors participating in service learning is significantly lower than that reported by the other three peer sets, as those proportions ranged from 58-60%, while only 44% of CU Denver seniors reported participating in service learning.

Definition: Service Learning & Community-Based Learning
Adapted from the Engaged Faculty Institute Curriculum (Campus Compact of the Mountain West).

Field-based experiential learning that connects meaningful community engagement, course content, and civic responsibility. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying with ongoing efforts to identify needs, assets, and solutions with the community. In these programs, students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in the classroom setting on their service experiences.

- Service experience must be embedded in a credit-bearing course.
- Service experience is clearly and explicitly integrated into the academic curriculum including reading and class presentations and linked to the teaching and learning goals of the course.
- Must address a genuine community need and are designed in collaboration with community representatives, exemplifying reciprocal university/community relationships.
- Service experience must employ meaningful service. Service learning/community-based learning should not be an episodic volunteer program nor an add-on to an existing course or merely logging a set number of community service hours to meet a college requirement (National Commission on Service Learning).
- Some of the course assignments and teaching strategies must be tailored to integrate the service work into the fabric of the course by demanding that students reflect on the relationship between that community-based work and the course content. Thus, students might be asked to keep a journal in which they reflect on the relationship between what they are learning in class and the community work they are doing, or write a case study or an observation paper based on their service work, or conduct research on a historical topic or a public policy issue related to their community work, or develop a class presentation relating their service experience to key concepts explored in the course.
The best service learning/community-based learning courses are those that emphasize both student learning and community needs: “A partnership of mutual benefit”. Service learning/community-based learning should not be an episodic volunteer program nor an add-on to an existing course or merely logging a set number of community service hours to meet a college requirement (National Commission on Service Learning).

CU Denver Community Engagement

Our mission is to develop CU Denver students into advocates of sustainable social change through service and collaboration with communities to address social, cultural, and environmental injustices.

Community Engagement is approached from a social justice and asset-based perspective. Based on this approach the following values guide engagement:
- Social Justice & Equity
- Experiential & Reflective Learning
- Collaborative & Reciprocal Relationships
- Sustainable Change
- Student Empowerment

Benefits of Service Learning

Benefits for Students

- Service learning positively impacts student ability to apply academic concepts to the “real world.”
- Service learning positively impacts academic outcomes such as complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development.
- Students who participate in service learning are more likely to graduate
• Service learning has a positive effect on both student personal and interpersonal development.
• Service learning has a positive effect on social responsibility and citizenship skills.
• Service during college is associated with continued community involvement post-graduation.

At A Glance: What We Know about the Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities, 2001.

Benefits for Faculty

• Offers a venue to explore research opportunities
• Enhances teaching repertoire
• Increased contact with students
• Personal and professional development around effective teaching and learning
• Increased awareness of community issues and their relationship to academic disciplines
• Increases the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration


Quality Service Learning Course Design

• Integration of experience with learning goals and other course elements
• Opportunity for analysis of and/or reflection on experience
• Substantial experiential or community-focused component in which all students are required to participate
• Appropriate student preparation for experiential activity (e.g. training, orientation, etc.)
• Appropriate partnership
• Appropriate distribution of benefits
• Integration of the engaged civic learning component into student assessment
• Sharing of information or findings with community partners and/or others.

In part, the success of a service-learning course depends on course design and the “fit” of that design with the needs of the community partner and the identified student learning outcomes. Service-learning courses typically fall into one of the following three categories:

1. Direct/Traditional: Engaging in direct or indirect service (often place-based) that addresses a community identified need

Example: Brandon Kosine’s Positive Psychology (Casper College)

Students in this course act as Strengths Coaches at a local alternative high school for adolescents recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. Using a structured curriculum based on Strengths Finder, each week students meet with their mentees. They then engage in critical reflection (both written and in class) in which they apply course concepts to their service experience.

2. Research-based: Gathering, compiling, and presenting information that addresses a community identified need

Example: Lisa Dale’s Wild Colorado First Year Seminar

Wild Colorado will help welcome students to the University of Denver by locating them in the Rocky Mountains among the most beautiful and treasured wild places in the world. Wilderness is a colloquial term that suggests pristine landscapes; more importantly for the purposes of the course, Wilderness refers to a specific federal designation for tracts of public land that triggers a host of guaranteed protections. During Discoveries Week, the class will take an all-day field trip to visit and hike in a designated Wilderness area. The trip will kick-off our intensive study of the issues that are specific to the designation, maintenance and ongoing protection of remote landscapes. This First Year Seminar is founded on a community-based learning model, and our class will work closely with the U.S. Forest Service’s Wilderness program to collect data for Wilderness management.
3. Advocacy: Educating others about topics of public interest to create awareness and action specific

Example: Anne DePrince’s The Science of Violence Against Women (DU)

In this Research Methods course, students conducted literature reviews, produced annotated bibliographies, and made formal presentations around the root causes and systemic issues surrounding violence against women. The students then organized a public dialogue on the topic with city and county officials, representatives from community organizations, faculty, staff, students, and community members participating.

Adapted from the Engaged Faculty Institute Curriculum (Campus Compact of the Mountain West).

A Note on Community Partnerships

Defining community in community-engaged work is more about the process of asking questions than about a strict definition of who “is” community or “represents” community:

- Are those most affected by the issue at the table?
- Are those at the table the individuals who have a stake in the issue that is being addressed?
- Are those at the table the individuals/organizations with the resources (knowledge, connections, funding) needed to address the issue?
- Do they play decision-making roles?
Critical Reflection

Experiential learning, including service-learning, problem-based learning and community-oriented primary care curricula, is built on the foundation of action-reflection theorized by John Dewey and David Kolb. According to Dewey (1938), “Experience and education cannot be directly equated to one another. For some, experience can be mis-educative.” In order for students to make deep connections between the service experience and the course content, they must engage in critical reflection (Crews, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Ribek, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 2003; Ash & Clayton, 2009). Critical reflection, in the context of service learning (and, indeed, all experiential pedagogies), is “a process of metacognition that functions to improve the quality of thought and of action and the relationship between them” (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27).

Critical reflection, when thoughtfully designed, offers a mechanism to generate, deepen, and document learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Beyond that, critical reflection offers students a mechanism to explore their values and beliefs, challenge and deconstruct stereotypes, and consider present and future action based on their experiences. Finally, critical reflection should occur throughout the course and be structured such that it provides a means for both formative and summative assessment.

Critical reflection activities should (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999):
1. Clearly link the community based experience to the course content and learning objectives
2. Be structured in terms of descriptions, expectations, and the criteria for the assignment
3. Occur regularly through the semester
4. Allow for feedback and assessment by the instructor
5. Include the opportunity for students to explore, clarify, and alter their personal values

For more information on implementing service learning in your course or program, please contact Megan Frewaldt.

Megan J. Frewaldt – Assistant Director for Community Engagement
University of Colorado Denver | Office of Student Life
(303) 556-3944 | megan.frewaldt@ucdenver.edu | ucdenver.edu/volunteer
Campus Compact of the Mountain West

Campus Compact of the Mountain West is a membership organization of college and university presidents devoted to promoting civic learning. CCMW is part of a national coalition of more than 1,100 colleges and universities who are passionately committed to the value service learning and civic engagement brings to higher education and the community. We believe it is one of the most powerful tools to prepare students to be active, committed, and informed leaders and citizens. The University of Colorado Denver is a member institution of CCMW. For more information visit www.ccmountainwest.org.