



Three Rivers Community College Student Service Learning Handbook

Contents:	What is Service Learning?	1
	Definition	1
	What Service Learning is Not.....	1
	How Service Learning Can Benefit You	2
	Your Responsibilities as a Service Learning Participant	2
	Your Service Learning Project.....	3
	How to Find Service Learning Opportunities at TRCC.....	3
	What to Expect.....	3
	Will You or Your Professor Choose the Site?	3
	Time Management	3
	Contacting Community Organizations.....	4
	Planning Your Project.....	4
	On Campus Projects.....	4
	Your Responsibilities as a Service Learning Participant	4

What is Service Learning?

The American Association of Community Colleges offers this definition of Service Learning: “Service-learning combines academic studies with community volunteer service, enhancing student learning through a hands-on service experience that meets a community need. Through reflection assignments, students demonstrate their understanding of course objectives” (aacc.org).

For service to be Service Learning, it must meet the following requirements:

1. It must relate in some way to the material being studied in a course. The service should enhance the learning experience for students.
2. Students must have the opportunity to reflect on their service, connecting it to what they are learning.
3. The service should be meaningful, i.e. fulfill a real community need.

What Service Learning is Not

It is the balance between academics and service that makes your volunteer work Service Learning. Service Learning is equally about service and learning. It is not simply volunteering, where the focus is primarily on those being served, nor is it an internship or field study where the focus is primarily on what is being learned.

Most importantly, **Service Learning is not a “soft” alternative to academic work.** It must be academically rigorous and focused on course learning objectives. If anything, you should expect Service Learning to be more rigorous than other projects because you must apply what you have learned in the context of the world outside the classroom with all its increased responsibilities and complexities.

How Service Learning Can Benefit You

Service Learning brings many benefits. It gives you a more interesting and engaging learning experience. It can also make your learning more personally meaningful by exploring concepts you learn in the classroom in real-world situations. You'll also be able to make a real impact in your community and learn more about Southeast Connecticut and the issues the region faces.

Real-world experience can not only help you learn more effectively, it can also help jump start your future. Whether you are new to the work force or considering changing careers, Service Learning and volunteering in general can be a great way to explore career fields and build your resume. Community service doesn't just look good on a resume, it can help you improve your professional skill set. Whatever you choose to do, you'll most likely be working with people, adapting to new environments, overcoming challenges, and maybe even gaining leadership experience. All of these are qualities you can talk about in interviews and on applications. You may even be able to find a volunteer opportunity or internship that relates to the field you hope to work in. You can get business and office experience, develop interpersonal skills, coordinate events, help with IT, etc. Volunteering is a great way to find out what you want to do. If you think you want to work with children, or work in a library, etc., try it out by volunteering to see if it is something that really interests you!

Depending on how much time and commitment you are willing to put into a Service Learning project or other volunteer opportunity, you may even be able to get valuable training. Here's just a few examples: you can get certified as a crisis hotline operator through the Women's Center or the Sexual Assault Crisis Center; you can receive docent training at the Mystic Aquarium or with one of the local historical societies; you can learn construction skills with Habitat for Humanity, etc.

Your Responsibilities as a Service Learning Participant

When you choose to do a Service Learning project, you are taking on an important responsibility. Non-profits often simply do not have enough paid staff to do everything they need to do. They count on their volunteers to operate. If you are doing a group project, your partners are depending on you for a grade. Whether you have agreed to volunteer a certain number of hours at certain times or agreed to complete particular tasks in a group project, remember that you have made a commitment that you need to honor.

Treat Service Learning or any volunteer work like you would a paying job. If you anticipate lateness or an unavoidable absence, give the community organization and/or your partners as much notice as possible. Dress and act appropriately. Appropriate dress varies from one agency to another. It could mean dressing business professional or wearing jeans and sneakers. Take your cue from other volunteers, and, when in doubt, ask someone. The same is true of appropriate behavior. Don't have contact with agency clientele outside of your service activities. Never report to your service site under the influence of alcohol or illegal substances. All of these guidelines are especially important when you are working with children.

Make sure you know the organization's policies, especially as they relate to **client confidentiality**. Do not discuss clients with anyone outside of the organization. If you need to discuss individuals for class assignments, change the individual's name and don't give any identifying information. Get your site supervisor's permission before using photography.

When in doubt about confidentiality or any other aspect of your Service Learning project, ask your site supervisor at the organization and/or talk to your professor. This is especially important if any aspect of your service makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Your professor and site supervisor are there to help and you owe it to yourself and the community organization to make sure you understand and are comfortable with all aspects of your service.

Your Service Learning Project

How to Find Service Learning Opportunities

Ask your advisor, department chair, or the Service Learning Coordinator if they can recommend a course that has done Service Learning in the past. You'll want to contact the professor to make sure he or she is planning to offer Service Learning in his or her course this semester as some professors only occasionally offer Service Learning.

You may be able to propose a Service Learning project to a professor. This is especially true of courses where Service Learning is sometimes an option. It never hurts to ask the professor when you have an idea for how to work Service Learning into an assignment. Remember to ask early enough in the semester that the professor has a chance to consider and you have time to plan your project. If you are planning an Honors contract with a professor, consider asking if you could do a Service Learning project as your additional requirement.

What to Expect...

Service Learning varies with every course and professor. In some courses, Service Learning will be required. In others, you may be able to choose between a Service Learning project and a more traditional project. Whatever form your Service Learning takes, you will be required to link your service experience to what you are learning in the classroom. Remember, you will be graded on your learning, not on your service experience.

How you are graded on your learning will also vary. Some professors will have you write journals and personal essays. Others might have you give a presentation to the class or incorporate your experiences into a research paper, or you might have to do a combination of all of these. It will depend on what course you are doing Service Learning for and how Service Learning fits into the learning objectives for that course.

Will You or Your Professor Choose the Site?

Some professors will choose a service site for you. Others will let you choose from a list of sites or may even allow you to propose your own choice for a service site. Often, whether or not you are able to choose the site is determined by how specific the requirements are for the Service Learning project. For example, you may simply need to work with an agency where you can explore one or more sociological principles or where you will be able to interact with people of a certain age group. These requirements are broad enough that you will likely be able to work from a list of agencies the professor provides or find your own service site (usually after getting approval from your professor). For other classes you might need to get experience in communications or work on website design, etc.— more specific requirements that may require you to be assigned to a site by your instructor.

Time Management

Do not wait until the last minute to set up your service project or schedule service hours. Whatever form your Service Learning takes, it is always a good idea to **give yourself deadlines** for when each phase of your project should be completed. Time management with Service Learning projects can be complex as you are often juggling several schedules besides your own. Setting personal deadlines before the assigned due dates can also leave you time to address any unexpected challenges that may arise. Some community organizations require volunteers to complete applications, have interviews, or take an orientation course. Waiting until the last minute to start your project can seriously narrow your choice of service sites and may even prevent you from completing your project.

Contacting Community Organizations

When you are approaching someone in the community to set up a Service Learning project, remember that you are representing the college as well as yourself. Always be respectful and polite. Service Learning is a two way street. You are giving your time and energy to the community organization, but they are also investing time and energy in your education and project.

When contacting a community organization, sometimes your first email or phone message might not receive an answer. Don't get discouraged. If your emails aren't getting responses, pick up the phone. If one message does not get answered, a polite follow up call is perfectly acceptable. If possible, allow a day or two between calls, but don't be afraid to call several times. Non-profits are often short staffed and very busy. If you are doing a group project, designate one person to be the primary contact with each community partner. This will prevent conflicting or repetitive messages.

Some questions you may want to consider when deciding on a service site include: does the organization require a certain number of hours or weeks; are work times flexible or do you need to agree to a set schedule; are there skills volunteers should already possess before beginning service; what kind of supervision will you receive; will an on-site orientation be provided and what will it cover? There are lots of great local non-profits you can approach, but don't forget to look at national and international non-profits as well. These can be a great option, especially for awareness campaigns or fundraisers.

Planning Your Project

If you are planning the details of your Service Learning project, remember to be flexible. You probably have some great, creative ideas to solve a community need. However, you'll need to check with your community partner to make sure that you are in fact meeting a real community need and in a way that is practical for the agency. Needs and activities at community organizations can change suddenly. Check with the agency to determine what their current needs are before you plan your project. For example, you don't want to collect 10 bags of clothing only to find out that the agency is only taking hats and gloves. Also, there may be restrictions such as confidentiality issues that you are not aware of.

On Campus Projects

Some classes have done Service Learning projects right here at Three Rivers through collection drives, awareness campaigns, etc. In these instances, you need to educate people about your cause if you want them to support you, especially if you are asking for donations. A flyer on the wall and a box in the cafeteria are not enough. Creativity is important, particularly if you are trying to organize an event on campus. What makes your project stand out from all the other ones that your classmates or other classes and clubs are doing? Why should people support your cause rather than all the other ones on campus?

Try to avoid doing a collection that is similar to one already being done by another group. You can also do something that doesn't involve asking for outright donations, for example, registering blood or bone marrow donors or doing an awareness campaign to educate your fellow students about an important issue like STDs or domestic violence. Also, be aware that there are procedures you must follow when posting flyers. Flyers should only be posted on painted brick (never on drywall) using blue painter's tape. Contact Student Programs, F213, to check out a roll of blue tape. If you wish to place a collection box in an office, the cafeteria, the library, etc. please contact someone responsible for those spaces for permission.

Service Learning can be a very rewarding experience, but you'll only get out of it what you put into it. With the right attitude, you can really make a difference in the community, and you might find that Service Learning makes a difference in you as well!