Rationale for Service-Learning: A Student Perspective

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Concordia’s mission statement is the motivating factor in many decisions and actions having to do with our college. Concordia College has always been strongly committed to upholding the mission statement and this is one of the reasons why Service-Learning at Concordia is so important. This college aims to “influence the affairs of the world by sending into the world thoughtful and informed individuals dedicated to the Christian life.”

Service-Learning is an important way in which Concordia students, faculty, and the administration can all work together to “influence the affairs of the world.” Service-Learning, if implemented effectively, gives students a way to influence the community in their own way, but still have the opportunity to learn something in connection with the college’s learning goals and the specific courses they are taking.

In order to fully achieve what it says in the mission statement, Concordia must be strongly committed to vocation, the community, as well as the liberal arts education it provides. An important piece of this liberal arts education revolves around outcomes. The goal of college for most is to gain further academic knowledge and propel themselves into a career in which they are satisfied. These outcomes of education are extremely important in how successful a college is in the preparation of its students. Service-Learning for most faculty and students enhances the way things are learned and reflected upon. A “real life” experience can cause more intensive critical thinking about a class topic, can influence change of a student’s major or even alter a potential career choice.

It is clear that Service-Learning is one of the college’s greatest assets and opportunities. Service-Learning provides us with the chance to lead and serve our community, to connect with our community, to allow our students to experience our community as a way of exploring their educational goals, their personal values, and in what ways they can affect their surroundings. All of these outcomes are so important in making sure each student is not only a responsible citizen, but is also a “thoughtful and informed individual dedicated to the Christian life.”
Definition and Guiding Principles

Service-Learning is an educational method in which students learn and apply academic and social skills to address important community issues.

Service-Learning experiences are designed to meet Concordia’s Goals for Liberal Learning specific course objectives, and the needs of the community. Several values influence the way Service-Learning is designed and implemented at Concordia:

- **Integration**: The service experiences are fully integrated with college and course learning goals. Course assignments are designed to assess the ways in which learning goals are met.

- **Leadership and Citizenship**: Students learn academic content and important social skills related to citizenship and “influencing the affairs of the world.” The focus is to cultivate lifelong commitment to service and community.

- **Reflection**: The reflection process helps students understand the issues that affect local and global communities, provides the opportunity to generate possible solutions, and encourages the capacity to act in compassionate and empathetic ways.

- **Partnership**: Community issues and strategies for addressing them are defined by and with the community. Relationships with community partners are longstanding, mutually beneficial and based on a spirit of partnership and collaboration. Care is taken to ensure that the service does not perpetuate stereotypes and systems of oppression.

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Considerations (Thinking Before Acting)

A great deal of thought and planning goes into quality Service-Learning experiences. There are many factors that play into how successful a Service-Learning experience is and to ensure a Service-Learning program’s effectiveness, impact, and success, here are a few considerations to think about before beginning the process of developing a Service-Learning program.

The Office of Student Leadership and Service is the “front door” for Service-Learning programs at Concordia. The foundation of Service-Learning at Concordia is a centralized approach in which the entire college community works together with the neighboring community to make the partnerships work effectively.

The Office of Student Leadership and Service is a partner in all Service-Learning ventures, but it can also offer technical assistance. The Office of Student Leadership and Service has exceptional resources to help with any or all parts of the Service-Learning process. Technical assistance can also make communication easier among everyone involved and this also makes the entire Service-Learning process more effective and further strengthens partnerships that have formed.

The other role of the Office of Student Leadership and Service is to encourage creativity among faculty and students. Service-Learning experiences are far more effective when the experience can be molded to fit the individual circumstances. Creativity is encouraged always and again, the Office of Student Leadership and Service has many exceptional resources that can be utilized by a wide variety of faculty. Obviously Service-Learning experiences can be incredibly varied among different academic areas on campus and although the differences in approaching or applying the Service-Learning experiences to those specific classes may vary slightly, the experiences are equally as valuable.

While beginning to think about Service-Learning and implementing it into a class curriculum, it would be helpful for faculty to answer some of the following questions:

- What do you want your students to learn from the Service-Learning experience?
- How are you going to incorporate their Service-Learning experiences into the course (possible assignments, etc.)? In other words, how will the Service-Learning experience be connected to what the students are learning in the classroom?
- How many hours would be necessary to have the Service-Learning work well for your class?
- What community partners would your students benefit the most from working with?

After thinking about some or all of the above questions, it is now time to take action and begin the process of implementing Service-Learning!
First Steps and Suggestions for Taking Action!

How to set up Service-Learning for your class:

1) Begin to Gather Ideas…

- The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse [www.servicelearning.org] is an online resource that includes resources for starting or maintaining Service-Learning initiatives. Resources in the extensive online library include topic guides, articles on Service-Learning in higher education, a calendar of Service-Learning events, discussion boards, among many other tools to promote effective Service-Learning in higher education.

- The Service-Learning Database provides a resource for faculty. The database enables you to use past Service-Learning experiences to help shape your choices, thoughts, and approaches to Service-Learning in the classroom. This database can be a fundamental resource for faculty because it allows you to see what has been done recently and allows you to use past experiences to your advantage.

2) Meet with a representative from the Office of Student Leadership and Service

Working through that office will be absolutely central in making your Service-Learning goals reality. It is not important for you to have a plan in mind when meeting with the office staff. Bring with you to the conversation any ideas you have and expect that your ideas will evolve towards a plan for implementation. The office staff and faculty member will negotiate how to move ahead. Typically, the office staff will facilitate the community connections while the faculty member writes the syllabus. In some cases, the Office of Student Leadership and Service will work with the Campus Service Commission student staff to plan the service experience.

3) Provide the necessary information to the Office of Student Leadership and Service staff member

Confirm with the Office of Student Leadership and Service the number of students involved in your class/classes, the number of hours each student is required to complete for the Service-Learning requirement in your class, and which community partners you would ideally like to work with. The office will explore the possibilities and make the necessary connections with the community partners.

4) Learning Outcomes and the Assessment of Service-Learning Experiences

Throughout the time frame that your students are being engaged in Service-Learning, it is important to ensure that the students are integrating their Service-Learning experiences with the course content. Reflection will enhance the experience and outcomes for them including but not limited to: journals, posters, presentations, etc.

5) Final Reflection and Evaluation

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As the semester wraps up, it is really important to also wrap up Service-Learning. Final reflection and evaluation will help to assess student learning as well as gather feedback about what worked well and what improvements can be made. Please reference the Service-Learning Outcome Assessment section of this handbook for ideas and resources.
Community Partnerships and Values

Community partnerships are central to quality Service-Learning. It is important to consider both the impact of the service on the community and individuals in it as well as the students’ experience of the service. It is also very important to make wise decisions about these community partnerships. Choosing the right partner for your Service-Learning project is very important, but considering the bigger picture is key to the process as well. There are a few things to remember when thinking about community partnerships.

- Connection to the Office of Student Leadership and Service

Consider the Office of Student Leadership and Service as the “front door” to community agencies. This office works with community agencies on a daily basis and knows the “ins and outs” of arranging successful Service-Learning projects. To save everyone’s time and to ensure that all working relationships are in the best interest of all involved, working with this office is highly encouraged.

- Considering Service-Learning as an “Equal Partnership”

It is important to remember that we are working in equal partnership with community agencies and that both the college and its students gain knowledge, wisdom, and experience from the community partners. The agency also benefits from its interaction with the students participating in the Service-Learning experience. This working relationship is one that should be presented as exactly that, a working relationship, and thought about as an equal partnership in which one partner is not being helped more than another. Thinking about Service-Learning in this way greatly influences the way a Service-Learning experience affects the students involved. It is important to move away from the thought that students are being sent to “help the less fortunate” and also to move toward presenting Service-Learning as an equal working relationship between this academic institution and community partners. When students recognize the opportunity to learn from the community members, they are more likely to think about what they are experiencing and gaining instead of the service they are providing for the community agency.

- Mutually Beneficial Relationships with Community Partners

It is also important to remember that the relationship between the community partner, the college and its students is a multi-faceted relationship that needs to be maintained by all involved parties. This relationship is reciprocal in nature and should be mutually beneficial to both the college’s students and the community partner. It is so easy to often fall into the trap of viewing the community as a “lab-like” environment in which students can participate, observe, and come away with new knowledge based on their experiences. Our local community is an environment in which students can participate as citizens-the primary goal of Service-Learning is to engage students within the community, to encourage them to learn something about the world around them, reflect on that, and eventually apply that in an academic context.

- Maintaining Relationships with Community Partners
Although the type and quality of relationship maintained with community partners is important, it is equally important to maintain that same relationship over a long period of time. Longstanding relationships with community partners deepen the quality of Service-Learning experiences and are better for the college and the community. Although any Service-Learning work makes some impact on the college, its students’, and perhaps the community partner, short-term relationships are not as useful. The amount of work it takes to plan and implement Service-Learning on both ends is extensive and for that reason, it would be better to create a longstanding relationship with the community partner. It makes sense that a community partner would be more willing to put in a stronger effort into a relationship they know will be longstanding.

• Patience and Understanding Are Key!

While community agencies usually love to partner with academic institutions and their students, this partnership is not always their first priority. The non-profit structure and limited funding usually leaves these agencies understaffed and sometimes challenged by the on-going needs of a partnership. It is important to always keep this in the back of your mind when working with community agencies. Community agencies appreciate the enthusiasm, flexibility, patience brought by faculty and students into the relationship and these things are what really make the Service-Learning experiences possible. Patience and respect are essential for each partner to have with the others!
Service-Learning Outcome Assessment

Assessment is the vital piece of the Service-Learning process. If assessment is forgotten or left out, the entire experience and the learning outcomes will be compromised in some way because students aren’t as able to process what they learned, in turn causing a less effective Service-Learning experience. When Service-Learning is implemented in an academic setting, it is important to assess the students’ learning in order to encourage the students participating to work toward some sort of outcome goal set by the faculty member. Assessment is important to measure what learning is actually taking place. The main goal of Service-Learning is to enhance what is being taught in the classroom by adding a “real world” service experience. Assessment is vital in guaranteeing that the service experience is a valuable one that complements the class’ learning objectives.

Assessing the Service-Learning experience can also help the faculty member and community partner know what worked, what specifically about the Service-Learning experience was the most impactful part of the experience, and what part of the Service-Learning experience can be changed to better fit the community agency, the academic institution, and the student.

The first approach to grading students’ Service-Learning experiences is designing specific assignments that assess the specific learning objectives that were desired. Examples of assignments can range from journals, discussion groups, videos, posters, murals, portfolios, and/or presentations as well as many other things. These assignments cause students to think more deeply and develop higher order thinking skills. Connections to course content can be made more explicit through these assignments. The more opportunities students have to constructively reflect upon what they experienced and what they will continue to apply to the rest of their lives, in whatever way, will benefit the students and make the Service-Learning experience far more successful.

Another approach to grading is very similar to awarding students points for class discussion and participation. The number of points given to the student for service done and how heavily this service will influence the students’ final grade is up to the faculty member and will greatly be influenced by the desired outcomes, the specific course, and the faculty member’s personal opinion on how heavily the service experience should weigh into the students’ grade.

Questions to ask students when evaluating students’ Service-Learning experiences:
(Some may suggest pre and post evaluations to make assessment more accurate)

1) What is the student’s understanding of Service-Learning?
2) How does the student plan to serve again?
3) How has the student’s awareness of their community increased after serving?
4) How does the student understand their role as a citizen leader?
5) How does the student feel they have learned something they can apply?

In addition to assessing specific course objectives, faculty may choose to assess students’ understanding of service and its connection to broader issues like vocation, citizenship, social, political, and economic systems, etc.

Concordia College Service-Learning Handbook
Glossary of Terms

Below is a variety of definitions that will be helpful when exploring Service-Learning. For more information about Concordia’s stance on these terms and how they are applied at Concordia, please see the “Definitions and Guiding Principles” section of the Service-Learning Handbook.

Service-Learning: is an educational method in which students learn and apply academic and social skills to address important community issues.

Although the above definition for Service-Learning is the one used most often by Concordia’s Office of Student Leadership and Service, there are many ways to approach Service-Learning and the ideas below represent the diversity among Service-Learning definitions.

- **Service-Learning** is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. (servicelearning.org)

- **Service-Learning** combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content. (Commonwealth College)

- **Service-Learning** is a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” (American Psychological Association)

- **Service-Learning** is a type of experiential learning that engages students in service within the community as an integrated aspect of a course. Students participate in an organized service activity and reflect on that activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (St. Olaf)

- **Service-Learning** is a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-Learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community." (Campus Compact National Center)

- **Service-Learning** is a process through which students are involved in community work that contributes significantly: 1) to positive change in individuals, organizations, neighborhoods, and/or larger systems in a community; and 2) to students’ academic understanding, civic development, personal or career growth, and/or understanding of larger social issues. This process always includes an intentional and structured educational and developmental component for students, and may be
Service-Learning is a teaching method that enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful service to their schools and communities. Young people apply academic skills to solving real-world issues, linking established learning objectives with genuine needs. They lead the process, with adults as partners, applying critical thinking and problem-solving skills to concerns such as hunger, pollution, and diversity. (National Youth Leadership Conference)

- Service-Learning is a teaching and learning method that upholds a commitment to appreciating the assets of and serving the needs of a community partner while enhancing student learning and academic rigor through the practice of intentional, reflective thinking and responsible civic action (Service-Learning Companion, Joan Kopperud and Dawn Duncan).

**Civic Engagement:** a participation in the civic duties and a recognition that a “bigger” picture does exist. Civic engagement could also be described as any thought, attitude, or action that increases the quality of life in a community.

**Engaged Campus:** An engaged campus is characterized by institutional participation and commitment to a multi-faceted and sustained community partnerships including Service-Learning, facility use, resource sharing, etc. For more information, please visit the Minnesota Campus Compact website [http://www.mncampuscompact.org/].

**Pre-professional training:** training that will supplement or enhance academic study of a certain concentration or pre-professional program.

- **Internship:** supervised career-related experience, credit or non-credit bearing.
- **Co-op:** forms a bridge between the academic and the working worlds and provides relevance for the academic experience by integrating a student’s classroom education with supervised on-the-job learning that is related to the student’s major and career interests. For more information on either internships or cooperative education, please visit the Career Center [http://www.cord.edu/Offices/career1.php].

**Volunteerism:** any person who contributes time to the promotion, organization, assistance, or leadership of an organization, and is not paid for services rendered.

**Community Service:** volunteer work done in the community. Sometimes community service refers to court-mandated work done in response to a violation of the law.

**Community-Based Learning:** the broad range of teaching/learning strategies that enable youth and adults to learn from any segment of the community.

**Work-based Learning:** the process by which an individual acquires the skills necessary to obtain, maintain, and increase the benefits of meaningful employment.

**FAQ**

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• Are faculty members free to set up their own programs?
  Making contact directly with potential community partners is strongly discouraged. It is helpful for community agencies to be contacted through a centralized system so they do not receive several calls from various people requiring them to spend excessive time responding. Working with them in a centralized manner eliminates any confusion on their part about whom they contact with questions or concerns.

• Are there boundaries or best ways to approach partners?
  It is important that with every action taken, Concordia is represented in the most positive light possible. In order to ensure this, a working relationship with the Office of Student Leadership and Service is highly encouraged. This campus office is very experienced and knows about the community needs, the agencies in our community, and what is necessary to effectively work with these agencies.

• How should I handle the logistics of transportation?
  Though many of the common sites of Service-Learning initiatives are within walking distance of campus, sometimes students may also need transportation to the site of Service-Learning experiences. Carpooling in all circumstances is encouraged and transportation can be arranged through Concordia’s Carpool for Service-Learning programs. You must work with the Office of Student Leadership and Service to arrange to use Carpool services.