

# Getting Faculty On Board with Service Learning: Issues of Infrastructure, Control, and Diversity

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Unlike a decade or two ago, the term “service-learning” is now a common academic, if not household, term. During this time, many psychology faculty have become increasingly aware of the basic tenets of service-learning such as reflection, reciprocity, and curricular ties. Today it is expected that service-learning not only connect with course curricula, but also involve learning on both the students’ and community partners’ part, include cognitive and emotional processing of the service-learning experience, and meet an actual need of the community (see National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, <http://www.servicelearning.org> for more information).

For the last decade, I’ve had the opportunity to travel to public and private colleges and universities across the country to meet and work with faculty and administrators who want to improve their service-learning programs. There are four issues that faculty and administrators articulate time and time again at many of the educational institutions I’ve visited. The first issue is a lack of infrastructure to support service-learning and other forms of civic engagement within some academic institutions. Second, faculty members are often concerned about the institutional prioritization of service-learning when they are evaluated for tenure and promotion. A third concern involves the issue of “control,” or the difference in our ability to control what goes on outside of our classrooms compared to the events that occur inside of them. The final issue involves unrealistic or inappropriate expectations regarding multiculturalism and diversity. While these are all complex issues that cannot be easily remedied, I offer several reflections based on my own experiences and many conversations with faculty, administrators, and staff throughout the country. I hope that my suggestions will ultimately help to improve the service-learning process so that students will not only survive their community engagement, but also will thrive because of it.

*Universities need to have an infrastructure to support faculty implementation of service-learning*

As I travel and hear about others’ experiences of trying to implement service-learning, I feel blessed to be a member of an institution that has a strong infrastructure in place for supporting college-community engagement. Our *Office of Volunteers for Community Service (OVCS)* has provided placement site assessment and monitoring, participant orientation, and logistical support to students and faculty for decades. I often am surprised to find that some faculty still are trying to figure out how to transport students from their academic institutions to service-learning sites.

With such logistical worries, there is greater reservation and anxiety about including service-learning in the curriculum, and less time for critical reflection and connecting the service-learning experience to the course material. The many benefits of community engagement for students, faculty, staff, and colleges in general have been well-documented. Therefore, improving the infrastructure for facilitating curriculum-based community engagement is an investment that will pay off. Without such an infrastructure, I would not have been able to include service-learning in every course that I have taught for the last 14 years; I would not have been able to produce more than a dozen service-learning articles and three books on the topic of community engagement; and I would not have been able to lay the groundwork for achieving tenure and promotion. Funding such infrastructure is a great challenge, but one that many institutions are overcoming through reorganizing budgeting priorities, collaborating with other institutions and community and educational organizations, as well as securing grants and other funding.

*Universities need to value service-learning in their criteria for tenure and promotion*

Another concern that many faculty members raise regards whether service-learning curricula and research will be institutionally rewarded during their tenure review. If community-based learning is not explicitly valued by an institution, tenure-track faculty will not want to go anywhere near it. Some faculty express a catch-22 of sorts: they feel a pressure from administrators to include community-based learning programs because it helps to improve town-gown relations, yet they may not receive the support that is needed in order to carry it through to tenure. Women and minorities may feel this catch-22 more than others because of our more collectivistic social orientation and our greater struggle, traditionally, for achieving milestones such as tenure and promotion. If universities adopt community engagement as an institutional priority, then they also need to make their evaluation criteria as equitably inclusive as possible for faculty and staff who use these pedagogies.

*Risk management must be addressed to build greater confidence in the service-learning experience*

A third issue that faculty and staff frequently mention concerning service-learning is their fear of not being able to control or manage what goes on outside of the classroom, especially in environments outside of the college itself. For example, I can recall the time that one of my students was mistaken for a prisoner and tackled by guards because of the color of clothes she wore that day. I also can recall times when my students saw and heard things at their sites that were overwhelming to them, and I wasn't sure whether a "mandatory reporting" call to Protective Services of the Department of Children and Families was in order. These are some of the many times that I have called upon our OVCS to help me figure out how to deal with an issue that I felt was outside of my control. Again, if there is a central university office that assists with finding and monitoring sites, then faculty will feel more comfortable about placing their students in the community. For example, our OVCS office keeps a running list of all of the sites available to students. They do pre- and post-assessments of each student's experience and offer student orientations and post-placement debriefing for both the undergraduates and the site personnel. In addition, they are the point of contact for faculty and student concerns or complaints about a site. In such cases, they either work more closely with the site, or remove that site as

an option until problems are remedied. Knowing that there is a central office that relates to the sites where my students are placed removes some of the burden of control from me personally, in that the college also is assuming responsibility for my students' experiences in the community. I would not have been as willing to integrate service-learning into all of my courses if I had that responsibility alone.

*It is important for faculty, administration, staff, and students to continue to learn about diversity*

The other issue that I frequently hear among faculty and staff as I travel throughout the country is their fear of not knowing everything that there is to know about other cultures and communities. Faculty, therefore, are sometimes reluctant to send their students into communities that they themselves do not know. Others seem to have an idea that if they have taken one or two diversity workshops, that alone should have prepared them for working in any community, and they are surprised when it hasn't. As a multi-racial woman, I have spent my entire life surrounded by diversity, and I have spent my adult life studying it. Yet, I will never know enough to feel totally secure about my knowledge and understanding of every environment, nor will I feel that I have all of the answers for my students regarding diversity issues. From my perspective, learning about diversity is best accomplished when we expect to study it, learn about it, and grow with respect to it, *every day* of our lives, no matter how experienced we are. If we are waiting on that one diversity class, or even that next diversity class in order to think that we have "arrived" with respect to multiculturalism, we are deluding ourselves. *We never arrive!* Learning about others and ourselves is a constant, life-long process that could last an eternity. So I encourage my students, my colleagues, and myself to study, listen, learn, experience, and grow every day.

### *Conclusion*

As faculty and staff, we alone cannot facilitate (nor be rewarded for) the healthy service-learning process. Nor can we alone control everything that goes on inside or outside of the classroom. We also will never have a complete handle on diversity because our world is too large and it is changing too quickly. However, with appropriate support, we can help our students successfully engage in service-learning, we can be equitably evaluated and rewarded for it, we can deal with the related issues and changes as they arise, and we can grow with the diversity that surrounds us and our students. We can make it happen!

### Recommended Readings

- Campus Compact, <http://www.campuscompact.org/>  
Dunlap, M. (2000). *Reaching out to children and families: Students model effective community service*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.  
National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, <http://www.servicelearning.org/>  
O'Grady, C. R. (2000). *Integrating service learning and multicultural education in colleges and universities*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.  
Zlotkowski, E. (1998). *Successful service-learning programs: New models of excellence in higher education*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.