



# Academic Community Engagement Handbook

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# What is Academic Community Engagement?

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education defines Academic community engagement as the collaboration between colleges and their communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources, grounded in partnership and reciprocity.

## What are the three types of Academic Community Engagement?

### Community Outreach

Provides university knowledge, facilities, or services directly to the public.

- **Volunteerism** is when the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient. The service can be independent of a course or related to a particular area of study.
- **Internships** engage students in service activities primarily for the purpose of providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study.

### Community-Engaged Learning

Courses blend academic credit with structured community service or projects.

- **Field Education** provides students with co-curricular service opportunities that are related, but not fully integrated, with their formal academic studies.
- **Service-Learning** links community service with specific course goals. Service-learning requirements must be stated in the course syllabus, so students are aware of it from the beginning of the term. Students should understand how the service-learning requirement is relevant to their mastering of course material. By clearly explaining the link between the required community service and course content, students will strengthen their commitment to service-learning assignments. Community service is an assignment, and its purpose is to facilitate student learning.

### Community-Based Research (CBR)

Studies co-created with community groups to address shared needs and create measurable impact.

CBR is a collaborative enterprise between community partners and academic experts who work together to develop questions that are responsive to community needs, determine

appropriate data collection methods, and develop effective knowledge dissemination strategies. CBR takes place in community settings and involves community members in the design and implementation of research projects, demonstrates respect for the contributions of success that are made by community partners, as well as respect for the principle of "doing no harm" to the communities involved.

## Which Academic Community Engagement is appropriate for my class?

At Penn State Berks, the OCE can help you decide which type of community engagement suits you best by informing you about:

- The most current in-person and/or virtual Academic Community Engagement opportunities available.
- Tips on selecting a community partner.
- Creating project agreements.
- Arranging the service logistics.
- Obtaining clearances.
- Formulating surveys and evaluations.

**To set up a meeting, contact Donna Chambers at [dmc6004@psu.edu](mailto:dmc6004@psu.edu)**

# Best Practices

The engagement activity/service is to be grounded in partnership and reciprocity. Thus, it is essential to establish respect and reciprocity with both your Community Partner and your students. Allow the community to define their needs and discuss those needs before you select a partner and decide on the engagement activity/service.

## Best Practices in running a successful Community Engagement Project:

- Careful, considerate, and deliberate thought along with thorough planning.
- Convey every detail about the process, the project, and its evaluation to both community partners and students alike.
- In advance, formulate a contingency plan that would resolve any unexpected and/or unavoidable circumstances that may arise.

## Best practices in selecting a Community Partner:

- Research the organization's history, mission, and related social issues.
- Meet with your partner in person, at their office when possible.
- Establish a relationship of trust! Work towards a partnership based on shared goals, measurable outcomes, and open communication.
- Acknowledge the expertise of your community partner and defer to them for insights about the community setting and projects.
- Mutually determine goals and outcomes with your community partner.
- Draft a Collaborative Classroom Project Agreement/Partnership Agreement as a tool for ensuring that communication, reciprocity, and mutual understanding are maintained throughout your project. This document should be created together with your community partner.

## Best practices in notifying students:

- When all or part of your course involves service-learning, community-based research, or community engagement in any way, convey this information to your students *before* they enroll in your course. This notification ensures that they understand your expectations.
- In your Canvas course description, consider adding something like, "this course requires each student to perform X amount of community service hours".
- Inform your students to obtain the necessary clearances for projects that involve children ages 5-18.
- On the first day of class, remind students of the community service commitment they are about to undertake. Explain the project to them in detail, while clearly defining your requirements and expectations. Highlight this information in your syllabus.

## Best practices in creating the syllabus:

Your planning should be evident in your syllabus. It is essential that the course syllabus be precise and detailed concerning the Community Service. Include the following in your syllabus:

- **The why** - Students need to understand the relevance of the community service. Therefore, the syllabus must illustrate the connection of how the community service will complement, enhance, and bring to life the information from the course readings, lectures, and reflections.
- **The service** - The syllabus must explain the scope and purpose of the community service, where and with which organization(s) the service will take place, and most importantly, the essential and mandatory participation of the student. The syllabus must also inform the student of the nature of the work and the service, how many hours per week are required, the anticipated timeline, etc.
- **The objectives** – explain the outcomes directly related to the engagement component.
- **The reflection** - Clear information about requirements for the reflective process.
- **The evaluation** - A concise description of the evaluation structure – how students will be evaluated and how the service-related evaluation will be weighted in the course.

## Best practices as the service begins:

- Remind the community partner and the students about the general housekeeping requirements needed to keep the activity/service on track.
- Ensure that community partners' and students' needs are equally met and accommodated, that all partners are involved in decision-making, and everyone shares the benefits of the activity/service. This can be achieved with regular meetings or check-ins.
- Resolve issues that might arise by correcting anything that is not working.

## Best practices as the service concludes:

- Invite community partners to be a part of reflections, presentations, and related activities.
- Thank your community partners for their investment in your students' learning.

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# Developing and Implementing a Service-Learning Course

Service-Learning links community service with specific course goals. The service activity is not an additional component, but an alternative way to teach course concepts. Thus, incorporating service-learning into a course requires thoughtful pre-planning and thorough follow-up. Successful learning and effective community contributions depend upon a well-integrated package of syllabus, orientation, reflection, and assessment. Following the steps mentioned below will result in a successful service-learning experience.

**Step 1: Reflect and Gather Resources.** The faculty member should reflect upon the call or motivation to teach an Academic Service-Learning course, community needs, ideas for service-learning projects, and determining learning goals for students. Review sample syllabi and course projects readily found on the internet.

**Step 2: Seek Consultation & Training.** Faculty members might consider taking advantage of professional development opportunities, such as workshops and conferences when possible. A list of upcoming conferences and training opportunities can be found on the Internet or by contacting the OCE.

**Step 3: Explore Partnerships with Community.** The faculty member should consult with The OCE and/or research local community agencies that would be appropriate partners for his/her service-learning course. Determine an appropriate match with a community partner.

**Step 4: Design or Redesign the Course.** Once a faculty member has found an appropriate community partner, the specific details of the course can be established. The faculty member should work as closely as possible with the community partner to design or redesign the service-learning course, *especially when solidifying student learning goals and details about the service experience.*

**Step 5: Develop a Syllabus with explicit learning objectives.** Faculty members are encouraged to check out print resources to guide them in course and syllabi development. Review the syllabus with the community agency/agencies and provide them with a finalized copy.

**Step 6: Provide Orientation & Training for Students.** The service experience should be discussed on the first day of class. Faculty members should walk students through the syllabus to explain learning goals and clarify the expectations of students for the course in and out of the classroom. Faculty members should prepare students, as much as possible, with the appropriate skills and brief them on their responsibilities regarding communication, follow-through, and professionalism. Student concerns, fears, and expectations regarding the service experience should also be addressed prior to beginning service-learning projects.

It is critical that the students, not only the faculty members, are familiar with the community agency before beginning their service-learning project. Students should understand the agency's mission statement and the services provided. Faculty members can present this information to the class or assign a Community Agency Background Information worksheet for students to complete.

**Step 7: Supervise Students.** Students should be provided with a timeline that includes benchmarks for obtaining clearances when needed, contacting the community partner, meetings with supervisors, signing agreements and waivers, beginning and completing the service, and completing evaluations. A schedule will help prevent students from procrastinating and trying to complete their service at the end of the semester. For students who are legitimately unable to participate in or complete the service, faculty should consider providing an alternative project or assignment. Faculty members should contact the community partner at least once mid-semester to seek feedback and, when possible, visit the service site(s) to observe the student-community partnership in action. Maintaining communication with the community partner is not only important for the service-learning partnership but also contributes to student accountability.

**Step 8: Implement Critical Reflection and Analysis Activities.** According to John Dewey, “truly educative” experiences generate interest, are intrinsically worthwhile, present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for new information and take sufficient time to foster development. Critical reflection and analysis are crucial to the process of transforming experiences gained from the service activities and the course materials into genuine learning. Reflection is essential for integrating the service experience with classroom topics. It fosters learning about larger social issues such as the political, economic, and sociological characteristics of our communities. Reflection enhances students’ critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.

**Step 9: Assess, Evaluate, and Disseminate.** At the end of the service-learning course, faculty members should seek feedback from students and community partners about the course and service.

- Use reflection assignments to assess student learning and evaluate performance.
- Evaluate analytical skills, communication skills, critical thinking, and judgment from students’ reflection papers and presentations. Grading rubrics are useful to clarify your expectations.
- Create individual or group assignments that require students to integrate the course content and the service experience.
- While points may be provided for successfully completing the service contract and obtaining supervisor evaluation, the grade should be based upon rigorous assessment of student learning and skill application.
- Use the evaluations to plan and refine your next service-learning course

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# Developing and Implementing a Community Based Research Course

A Community Based Research Course (CBR) engages students with community partners to investigate important social issues and/or health concerns. Researchers and community members work together as equal partners to address local and/or global needs, create positive social change, and guide real-world action. The CBR course focuses on research conducted *with* and *for* a community rather than *on* them. A CBR course requires equitable partnerships between academic researchers and community members, who co-define core issues, and share data transparency. There is a long-term commitment across every phase of the study to ensure shared decision-making, mutual benefit, and trust.

Developing and implementing a community-based research course requires the same core principles as a service-learning course: equitable partnerships, shared power, and ethical frameworks. In a CBR course, all research involving human participants must receive formal determination or approval from the Penn State Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any study activities can begin.

The key steps in creating a CBR course include building local partnerships, designing collaborative curricula, managing institutional reviews, and creating sustainable action.

## Building Partnership and Trust

- **Identify stakeholders:** Spend time connecting with local leaders, gatekeepers and grassroots groups.
- **Establish equity:** Set up a shared governance structure from the start so that everyone helps to make real decisions. Acknowledge and plan for institutional imbalances by ensuring community members share control over data, processes, and project direction.
- **Nurture trust:** spend time listening to community concerns without a preset agenda.

## Design and Assessment

- **Define the problem:** Co -create research questions based on community needs.
- **Leverage assets:** build on existing community strengths, networks, and resources already present in the area.
- **Plan Methodology:** design data collection tools together to fit the cultural context. Co-create questions and work together to choose what problems to study. Involve both students and community stakeholders in shaping project goals, research methods, and final deliverables so expectations stay aligned.
- **Shape methods:** Build surveys or interview guides that fit the local culture.
- **Collect data:** Gather information alongside community members

## Managing Institutional Reviews

- **Institutional reviews:** research projects at Penn State University are managed through the Human Research Protection Program and the Office for Research Protections. To qualify for Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, all students and community participants must complete foundational ethics training, such as customized modules utilizing the CATS IRB online system.
- **Fieldwork and integration:** Blend weekly seminars with hands-on community fieldwork, allowing students to apply qualitative or quantitative tools safely and sensitively.
- **Equitable dissemination:** Co-present findings with community partners at the project's conclusion rather than treating the community as just a data source.

## Implementation and Action

- **Collect data:** involve community members as active Co researchers or interviewers. **Analyze together:** interpret findings through local and academic lenses. Look at the results as a team to make sure they are correct.
- **Share findings:** share outcomes with the community first in a helpful way, then share results with the broader scientific field.
- **Translate to action:** apply results directly to local programs, policies, or community improvements.
- **Plan for the future:** Create long-term goals and lasting benefits

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# Reflection

Reflection looks back on the implications of actions taken; determines what has been gained, lost, or achieved; and connects these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts. Reflection involves observation, asking questions, and putting facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning. Reflection promotes cognitive learning and growth.

Reflection also improves basic academic skills and promotes a deeper understanding of course subject matter and its relation to the non-academic world; it improves higher level thinking and problem solving and students' ability to learn from experience. Critical reflection promotes personal development by enhancing students' self-awareness, their sense of community, and their sense of their own capacities.

## Effective Academic Reflection:

- Occurs before, during, and after the service component of the course so that students can practice and develop the capacity to engage in deeper and broader reflection.
- Clearly links the service experience to the course content and learning objectives and includes opportunities for students to explore, clarify, and alter their values.
- Is structured in terms of description, expectation, and the criteria for assessing the activity.
- Provides instructor feedback so that students learn how to develop and improve their reflective practice and critical analysis.

## Types of Reflection

When facilitating reflection, vary the activities to accommodate multiple learning styles; create a reflective classroom rather than just adding a reflective component. You may assign one or several types of reflection activities, allowing students to pick the type of reflection that matches their creative process. It is best practice to provide a rubric for each type of reflection so that students understand how you will evaluate their reflection activity.

There are many ways in which meaningful reflection can be achieved:

### Journals

Journals should not merely be simple inventories of events. They should address situations objectively, subjectively, and analytically. Instructors may provide questions to guide students in addressing issues and they should review the journals periodically.

## The ORID Model

This type of reflection provides a progression of question types, provided by the instructor, designed to move students from reflecting on the concrete experience to analytical and subjective reasoning. This reflection may also ask students to incorporate their experience into a new paradigm explaining how the experience will affect their career path, their personal life choices, or their use of new information, skills, or technology.

## Group Discussions

The groups may involve either the entire class or just small numbers of students. The instructor may either select the groups or allow students to choose their own group members. The group members exchange ideas about the course topics and/or the service experiences. The instructor may either pose general or narrowly focused questions for discussion. A scribe may be assigned to submit a summary of the discussion to the instructor or to the rest of the class.

## Analytic Papers

Analytic papers provide students with an opportunity to describe their service experience, to evaluate the experience and what they learned from it, and to integrate their experiences with course topics. If the papers are assigned at the end of the course, students can make use of ideas derived from class discussion, journals, and other reflective activities provided during the course. Papers may include traditional library research, interviews, or other quantitative and qualitative methods.

## Portfolios and Notebooks

Students may be asked to compile materials relevant to the community engagement experience and the course of which it is a part. These materials may include journals, analytic papers, scripts/notes for class presentations, items created or collected as part of the service, pictures, agency brochures, handbooks, time sheets, service agreement, and training materials. Portfolios provide a focus for reflection on the service experience and its documentation. Introductory letters or papers addressed to the reader can help students to discover meaning through writing.

## Presentations

Students may be asked to make presentations to their classmates (and/or to a broader audience) describing their community engagement experiences, evaluating them and integrating them with the course topics. Community partners may be invited and/or students may present at the work site. Presentations may be videotaped to share with other audiences.

## Reading Responses

Students may be asked to write responses to course readings, connecting them with service experiences. Students can be allowed greater or less freedom in how they respond, by posing either general or more focused questions.

## Electronic Forum

Students may be asked to contribute to electronic discussion on service-learning and course topics using a listserv, discussion board, or blog. They may respond to questions posed by the instructor, to points raised by other students, or to readings posted on the site. They may prepare websites that document and reflect on their work. Remember, public discussions work best with formal rules of engagement and clear expectations for type, frequency, and content of postings.

## Simulations and Role Playing

Students may problem-solve by acting out potential problems or issues at the worksite. Games can simulate challenging situations.

## Letters

Students may write letters to community partners, parents, or other appropriate audiences to help them process their learning.

**For detailed information, please contact Donna Chambers at: [dmc6004@psu.edu](mailto:dmc6004@psu.edu).**

## Evaluation and Feedback

At the end of any community engagement activity, faculty members should seek feedback from students and community partners about the experience. The feedback will reveal the participants' perception of the experience, the value it offered, suggestions for improvement, and whether the experience is worth repeating in the future.

The OCE has evaluation forms you can administer electronically to your students and to your community partners. They are short, to the point, and can be completed quickly. The OCE will generate a report for you from the responses received.

**The Student Evaluation** explores the following:

- Did the community engagement activity meet my expectations?
- Did the experience enhance my knowledge of the community organization and its work?
- How satisfied were you with this experience?
- How likely are you to perform a service again with this organization?
- How likely are you to recommend working with this organization?
- How likely are you to recommend that this activity be repeated in this class?
- What did you like most about this experience?
- What did you like least about this experience?
- What suggestions do you have about improving the experience for students?
- Do you have any additional comments?

**The Community Partner Evaluation** explores the following:

- Did you benefit from partnering with this class as you had expected?
- Did the students provide quality services or resources to meet your needs as promised?
- Did the students work with you in a professional manner?
- Did the students work well together?
- Did the professor maintain contact with you?
- Was the professor responsive to my needs?
- Were you responsive to the professor's needs?
- Would you partner with a service-learning course again?
- What went well about the service provided by this course?
- What would you like to have occurred differently?
- What impact did this project have on your organization?
- Overall, how would you rate your service-learning experience?

**If you would like to receive the electronic version of the evaluation forms, please contact Donna Chambers at: [dmc6004@psu.edu](mailto:dmc6004@psu.edu).**

# Community Engagement Activity Documents and Opportunities:

The OCE can provide you with documents you may need or want for your Community Engagement Activity:

- Collaborative Project Agreement
- Project Administration Checklist for Instructors
- Project Administration Checklist for Students
- Student Agreements
- Training Completion Acknowledgement
- Confidentiality Agreements
- Risk Awareness and Management

**The OCE also provides:**

- Current in-person and virtual community engagement opportunities
- Clearances Fairs – held once per month or in your classroom (based on availability)
- Research Repositories
- Community Partner Pairings

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