

Dealing with Negative Students in Service-Learning

Introduction:

Service-Learning is a teaching and learning tool. Just like any other assignment or course objective it can add or detract from the learning experience. This guide was developed to help faculty strengthen existing Service-Learning and deal with negative students.

Consider the Students

Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning and it involves critical thinking and self-directed learning. These two concepts are not only difficult to teach they can be stressful for students who are not accustomed to learning in this manner.

Dealing with Negative Students

Students complain about all types of academic work. Service-Learning is no different, and students are sometimes resistant to the assignment of what they may view as “extra” work. This is completely normal and part of the process. There are however, some ways that faculty members can negate and diffuse this behavior.

The majority of complaints can be circumvented by clear instructions and frequent communication.

Complaint Type One: Time Required/Hard to Find Time

This is the most legitimate issue facing students involved in Service-Learning activities. Most of our students have commitments beyond their academic studies. However, there is no reason to believe that a reasonable Service-Learning requirement cannot be managed by any student.

Responses

- Explain course requirements and expectations clearly
- Encourage students to consider Service-Learning carefully
- Encourage students to plan early. Faculty can help by planning class or individual or small group discussions throughout the semester, not just one paper at the end.

Sometimes our best efforts at communicating fail when students do not understand the purpose or basic concept behind their service. One symptom of this can be found when students make statements such as:

*“Why do we have to do **extra** work?”*

*“This took time away from my **real** assignments”*

*“I don’t have time to **volunteer**”*

Responses

- Explain very clearly that service hours are an integral part of the coursework
- Encourage students to view it like research and field studies
- Facilitate pre-reflection exercises that appeal to altruistic nature in students
- All students are expected to spend time on assignments outside the classroom
- Service hours are **NOT** extra

Complaint Type Two: Expectations Unclear

Service-Learning is new to most students, therefore questions are expected. One symptom of this can be found when students make statements such as:

"I don't understand what is expected of me."

"Somebody should have told me what I was going to see and what to expect"

Responses

- Service-Learning MUST be clearly outlined in syllabus
- Service-Learning requires that students take ownership in their own learning, a skill most students have yet to develop. Making contacts, asking questions, making arrangements, and solving problems is part of the experience and should be expected to be difficult at first.
- Remind students of expectations

Complaint Type Three: More choices of service locations are needed

While the Student Life Service-Learning Center's list of approved community partner agencies is extensive and updated frequently, the location approved for a specific class may be more limited. The curriculum may dictate a narrow focus or an instructor may choose a special project with a single agency. Locations must provide opportunity for experiences that meet the course learning objectives and requirements. Students should be encouraged to recommend new agencies to their faculty or Service-Learning Center staff. Students should be aware that the approval process for new agencies can take time. Students who are experiencing these feelings may say things such as:

"Why can't I do my service at this agency?"

"I want to volunteer at a site where I feel I can make the most difference."

Responses

- Students should discuss options or concerns with their instructor or the Service-Learning Center staff.
- Instructors and faculty should clearly explain their reasons why certain agencies are selected for the course.
- We encourage students to complete service with agencies and at locations that they are not familiar with. This enhances the experience and encourages the learner to step outside his or her comfort zone.

Complaint Type Four: Service not related to coursework

This form of complaint and comment is troubling. There is no reason to use Service-Learning in a class if it is not connected to the course content in a deliberate way. If it isn't connected, it isn't Service-Learning. Students who are experiencing these feelings may say things such as::

"This is not related to my course material."

"This doesn't have anything to do with school"

"How is this going to help me succeed?"

"The instructors didn't explain why we were doing this."

"I don't understand how this will help me get a job."

Responses

- Instructors and faculty should work to help students understand the relevance of the service experience to traditional classroom learning, and facilitate the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to discern relationship using different types and sources of information.

- Instructors and faculty should provide opportunities for reflection that are **continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized**. Reflection should occur before, during, and after the experience – not just a single paper turned in a week before finals.

Complaint Type Five: The random complaint

Some students may ask questions that do not fall into any of the above categories. We have provided some examples and answers to these questions, complaints, and concerns.

“Some of the neighborhoods and agencies do not seem safe..”

Safety of our students is our number one concern. We do not partner with agencies that do not have experience with volunteers and a proven track record of volunteer safety.

“I was shy and found it hard to just jump in and help.”

This is an opportunity for development of personal skills and improved self-confidence.

“Sometimes I felt that I was in the way at the agency where I worked.

Did the student explain his or her concerns to the site supervisor?

“They treated me rather poorly.”

What might the student do differently in the same situation if the roles were reversed?

“The agency was not flexible with my schedule and they made me fill out tons of paperwork.

Agencies do not design procedures to please individual preferences of volunteers.

Students should learn or demonstrate flexibility and cooperation for the common good. Students may always select another service agency