



Toward Effective Service-Learning

A resource of *Inspired to Serve: Youth-Led Interfaith Action*, a collaborative project of Search Institute and Interfaith Youth Core with support from Learn and Serve America.
www.inspiredtoserve.org

What is service-learning?

Service-learning is an approach to youth engagement and education that integrates meaningful service to others with intentional learning and personal development.

Why is service-learning important?

When done well, service-learning . . .

- Engages young people in meeting human needs, strengthening communities, and working for justice;
- Develops problem-solving skills, deepens values, and strengthens pro-social commitments;
- Promotes social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual growth;
- Enhances understanding and respect across religious, socioeconomic, cultural, and other areas of diversity;
- Builds Developmental Assets, which provide the foundation for healthy development;
- Improves school performance, grades, and learning;
- Reduces the likelihood that young people will engage in high-risk behaviors; and
- Increases the likelihood that young people will be civically engaged throughout their lives.

What makes service-learning effective?

- Young people have ***active and meaningful leadership roles*** throughout the service-learning process, including the selection and design of projects; preparation for service; conducting the service; reflecting on and learning from the service; and sharing what they learn with others.
- ***Clear and intentional learning and development goals*** guide the whole process, including active, intentional, and structured reflection on and learning from the service experience.
- Young people are ***engaged in service-learning across time***, including multiple sessions that involve planning, action, reflection, and recognition—as well as ongoing involvement in which each experience builds on the learning from previous experiences. (Research shows that service-learning is most effective when it involves at least 20 hours of active engagement across at least a semester.)
- The projects ***meet real community needs***. This means the projects are ***designed with the community*** and address at least some part of ***complex problems in complex settings*** rather than simplified problems in isolation.

For example . . .

Community service occurs when young people engage in useful community service when they remove trash from a streambed.

Service-learning occurs when young people remove trash from a streambed, and . . .

- Decide to do the project based on listening to community priorities;
- Analyze the kinds of trash they find, its sources, and its impact;
- Dialogue and study about how their traditions each see responsibility for the earth;
- Reflect on their own life choices in light of what they have experienced and learned; and
- Share the results in congregations and community and suggest ways to reduce pollution based on what they learned.

How do I get started?

- **Emphasize youth leadership and youth voice**—Identify young people who can play a key role in shaping your efforts from the beginning. Listen to their hopes, concerns, wishes, experiences, and priorities. Support and partner with them in determining how to design and launch your service-learning efforts. Help them cultivate strong ownership and buy-in throughout the process.
- **Build on what's already in place**—Identify and examine what is already happening. Are there community service or volunteer opportunities already in place that you could enrich by introducing effective service-learning practices? Are people already doing effective service-learning in your community who could be resources or collaborators? (Think of schools, volunteer centers, colleges and universities, and other faith-based or community-based groups.) Are interfaith youth networks in place that would be ready and eager to engage in service-learning efforts?
- **Listen to the community's hopes and dreams**—Design service-learning activities in partnership with people in the community. Identify their hopes and dreams, matching their priorities with the passions and interests of the young people. The Inspired to Serve guide titled *Exploring Your Community's Strengths and Hopes: A Step-by-Step Guide for a Community Listening Project* offers guidance in an intentional project for listening to the community using best practices in service-learning.
- **Establish clear goals for projects that address both service and learning**—What kind of service will be meaningful and authentic to both the young people and the community? What do you hope young people will learn through the process? How do you hope they will grow (individually and as a group) through their participation? Keep these questions in mind as you design, prepare for, implement, reflect on, and evaluate your service and service-learning activities.
- **Be intentional about reflection and learning**—Take ample time to reflect on each service-learning experience with young people. Discuss what happened, what it meant to them and questions it raised, how it connected to their beliefs and values, and what they will do next because of those experiences. Use multiple methods for reflection, including discussions, journaling, art, poetry, video production, and other methods that are interesting and engaging for young people.

What other resources can help me?

Print and Video Resources

- **An Asset Builder's Guide to Service-Learning** (Search Institute)—Presents a basic framework and step-by-step process for service-learning in multiple settings (schools, faith-based organizations and networks, and community-based organizations). Presents the PARR model (Preparation, Action, Reflection, Recognition), which is utilized in the Inspired to Serve project.
- **Bring Learning to Life** (Learn and Serve America)—This free kit of resources introduces the benefits of service-learning in K-12 education settings. Videos, PSAs, action guides, and other materials are included in the kit, which may be ordered from the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- **The Complete Guide to Service-Learning** (Free Spirit)—This book features chapters on a variety of topics, complete with inspiring quotations, background information, activities, and real-life examples.

Web Sites

- **National Service-Learning Clearinghouse** (www.servicelearning.org)—Includes several useful overviews of service-learning, its definition, and best practices, including a downloadable PowerPoint presentation, “What Is Service-Learning?”
- **National Youth Leadership Council** (www.nylc.org)—This Web site includes a helpful and simple introduction to service-learning titled “Discover Service-Learning.”