

Ways to Integrate Community Engagement into an Existing Course

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There are many ways to integrate community engagement into an existing course, depending on the learning goals, the size of the class, the academic preparation of the students, and the community partnership or project type.

One-time group service projects:

Some course objectives can be met when the entire class is involved in a one-time service project. Arrangements for service projects can be made prior to the semester and included in the syllabus. This model affords the opportunity for faculty and peer interaction because a common service experience is shared. One-time projects have different learning outcomes than ongoing service activities.

Option within a course:

Many faculty begin community engagement with a pilot project. In this design, students have the option to become involved in the community-based project. A portion of the normal coursework is substituted by the community-based component. For example, a traditional research paper or group project can be replaced with an experiential research paper or personal journal that documents learning from the service experience.

Required within a course:

In this case, all students are involved in service as an integrated aspect of the course. This expectation must be clearly stated at the first class meeting, on the syllabus, with a clear rationale provided to students as to why the service component is required. Exceptions can be arranged on an individual basis or students can transfer to another class. If all students are involved in service, it is easier to design coursework (i.e., class discussions, writing assignments, exam questions) that integrates the service experience with course objectives. Class sessions can involve agency personnel and site visits. Faculty report that it is easier to build community partnerships if a consistent number of students are involved each semester.

Action research projects:

This type of class involves students in research within the community. The results of the research are communicated to the agency so that it can be used to address community needs. Action research and participatory action research take a significant amount of time to build relationships of trust in the community and identify common research agendas; however,

community research projects can support the ongoing research of faculty. Extending this type of research beyond the confines of a semester may be best for all involved.

Disciplinary capstone projects:

Community engagement is an excellent way to build upon students' cumulative knowledge in a specific discipline and to demonstrate the integration of that knowledge with real life issues. Upper class students can explore ways their disciplinary expertise and competencies translate into addressing community needs. Other community-based classes within the department can prepare the student for this more extensive community-based class.

Multiple course projects:

Community engagement projects with one or more partners may span different courses in the same semester or multiple courses over a year or longer. These projects must be broad enough to meet the learning goals of multiple courses over time, and because of this they may have a cumulative impact on both student learning and community development that is robust. Such projects may be particularly suited to course clusters or learning communities within or across disciplines, or course sequences, say, within a major, that build student capacity towards advanced learning and community action goals.