

Section 1

Four Myths About Academic Service-Learning*

To clarify the conceptualization for academic service-learning, as well as to distinguish it from other community-based service and learning models, we begin with four common misunderstandings about this pedagogy.

Myth # 1 - The Myth of Terminology: Academic service-learning is the same as student community service and co-curricular service-learning.

Academic service-learning is not the same as student community service or co-curricular service-learning. While sharing the word "service," these models of student involvement in the community are distinguished by their learning agenda. Student community service, illustrated by a student organization adopting a local elementary school, rarely involves a learning agenda. In contrast, both forms of service-learning - academic and co-curricular - make intentional efforts to engage students in planned and purposeful learning related to the service experiences. Co-curricular service-learning, illustrated by many alternative spring break programs, is concerned with raising students' consciousness and familiarity with issues related to various communities. Academic service-learning, illustrated by student community service integrated into an academic course, utilizes the service experience as a course "text" for both academic learning and civic learning.

Myth # 2 - The Myth of Conceptualization: Academic service-learning is just a new name for internships.

Many internship programs, especially those involving community service, are now referring to themselves as service-learning programs, as if the two pedagogical models were the same. While internships and academic service-learning involve students in the community to accentuate or supplement students' academic learning, generally speaking, internships are not about civic learning. They develop and socialize students for a profession, and tend to be silent on student civic development. They also emphasize student benefits more than community benefits, while service-learning is equally attentive to both.

Myth # 3 - The Myth of Synonymy: Experience, such as in the community, is synonymous with learning.

Experience and learning are not the same. While experience is a necessary condition of learning (Kolb, 1984), it is not sufficient. Learning requires more than experience, and so one cannot assume that student involvement in the community automatically yields learning. Harvesting academic and/or civic learning from a community service experience requires purposeful and intentional efforts. This harvesting process is often referred to as "reflection" in the service-learning literature.

Myth # 4 - The Myth of Marginality: Academic service-learning is the addition of community service to a traditional course.

Grafting a community service requirement (or option) onto an otherwise unchanged academic course does not constitute academic service-learning. While such models abound, this interpretation marginalizes the learning in, from, and with the community, and precludes transforming students' community experiences into learning. To realize service-learning's full potential as a pedagogy, community experiences must be considered in the context of, and integrated with, the other planned learning strategies and resources in the course.

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