

Effective Practice: Risk Management in Academic Service-Learning

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Issue(s) Being Addressed:

The service component of a service-learning course can potentially be harmful to all of the stakeholders (students, faculty, and community-based organizations). The following practices can be utilized by service-learning participants in order to reduce this risk.

Actions to Consider:

Madonna University has a general risk release form that is used for all off-campus activities. Several faculty members have voiced complaints about using this form in academic service-learning courses. Namely, the form requires information that is superfluous in a service-learning context, and additionally, it lacks other elements that are unique to service-learning projects.

Furthermore, an informed consent form alone is inadequate to significantly reduce the risk of an ongoing, semester-long service project. There must be additional preparation in the classroom.

Overview:

Madonna University's Office of Service-Learning has designed an informed consent form template that is more applicable to service-learning projects. The template can be used by faculty doing service-learning, and includes spaces to list the specifics of each student's service (including potential risks), the number of hours volunteering, the projects and duties performed, the outcomes of the project, and emergency contact information.

When describing the service in class, faculty ought to make sure they go into detail about the risks involved in the service, as well as the benefits and the skills required of the students. It is a good idea to orient the students to potential situations. In this regard, faculty should be somewhat familiar with the service site and service work.

Faculty should have a clear understanding of service agency's insurance for volunteers. Faculty can also contact either the Office of Service-Learning or the Office of Student Activities for a list of organizations already approved.

Faculty should set up a line of communication among themselves, the agency, and the students. This includes:

- Making sure a representative of the organization is present at all times to handle emergencies, provide guidance, and to help students learn the skills of the job
- Making sure the agency has the university's contact information
- Making sure the students' emergency contact information is accessible to the agency

Key Components:

- Faculty should tailor and administer the service-learning informed consent form.
- Faculty and agencies should spend time educating and training students in potential risks and safety procedures.
- Faculty should establish a clear line of communication among themselves, students, and the agency.