

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Effective Service Learning in a Teacher Education Program

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In Teacher Education programs, service learning can be a valuable precursor to student teaching. Don't wait until the end of the program to get future teachers into classrooms; give them the opportunity early on to benefit from these experiences. Service learning in schools and youth-oriented sites will not only strengthen teaching skills for those who are true future teachers, but it will also guide some others into more fitting fields. To have a successful Teacher Education program, include these key components:

Offer opportunities for partners to share their needs

Community Service Connections: Hold an event at the beginning of each semester that brings local schools and youth-oriented organizations to your institution's campus. Invite all schools and organizations that might provide valuable SL opportunities to your students. Be sure to clearly define and explain the SL requirements of your students so that the organizations that attend the event are those that can provide such experiences and would benefit from SL students in their programs and classrooms. Each school and organization should set up a booth or table that displays their opportunities for SL, and the Teacher Education students should be invited to visit the tables. This is a way for the agencies to share their specific needs while the students get a realistic idea of the SL opportunities available to them.

Service requests: Always be available for service requests from local schools and agencies. When the word of your program gets out, you may get a lot of phone calls requesting students to serve at various sites. Include these schools and organizations in your Community Service Connections event and share the opportunities with your students. You may not be able to fulfill every request, but keep a record of them all for future ideas. Be honest with the requesting agencies and schools about your ability to fulfill their needs.

Require service learning

The experience is not optional: Because the experience of leading classrooms or groups of youth is so important to future teachers, it is essential that all teacher education students participate in the SL projects. Don't make SL optional; require it of all students in the program. And don't restrict the SL experiences to one course; students should be exposed to these opportunities all throughout their education. Thirty hours is generally a good number of SL hours to require per education course. Be flexible to the needs and requirements of your individual courses, but don't be afraid to push the students. These experiences are invaluable to their education as future teachers.

Offer various types of service learning projects

Individual placements: By letting students choose their own placements, they can tailor their experiences to their personal interests. In some cases, students will benefit from having a variety of experiences in different settings. Other students will get the most out of serving all of their hours at one site. Either way, the student gets a tailor-made SL experience.

Group projects: Along with individual placements, offer some group projects as well. These can be one-day events that all teacher education students can participate in. For instance, invite a group of elementary or middle school students to campus for a day of science discovery. Your students can lead them in experiments and interactive lessons. Or lead a group of younger students in a day of crafts centered around a cultural holiday. This will be beneficial to all students, especially those not yet comfortable leading a classroom alone.

Keep track

Journaling: Before, after and, if possible, during their SL experiences, have your students keep a journal. This will allow them to reflect on what they've experienced and how to apply it to what they are learning in the course. It's helpful to give them a format where they reflect on what happened, what it means, why it's significant, and how they will apply those learning experiences to their own methods and principals. You can collect these journals and offer feedback on what else they might think about regarding the SL experiences.

Service logs: In order to keep track of all the partners your students serve, be sure to have them log their service. Give the students service logs that they take with them to each experience. The logs should include the name of the school or agency, the name of the teacher or person they worked with, any necessary contact information, the date and number of hours the student served, and a signature from the contact. These can be turned in periodically and again at the end of the semester. They will help you determine student grades for the SL component of the course.