

Innovative Practice: Service Learning

Title & Category

Service Learning is embedded in mission, curriculum, and teaching. (AQIP Category II)

1. What does this Innovative Practice do and how does it work?

Service Learning (SL) is central to the university's mission and integrated within academic and co-curriculum offerings. As a distinctive objective, service learning has strengthened commitment to mission; enhanced curriculum; benefited teaching and learning, curriculum, course design and teaching styles; and improved community relations. Faculty and staff commitments have been formalized and supported through the Service Learning Office. Staff provide coordination of training, orientations, and reflection activities, ongoing evaluation of service projects, and programs to increase awareness of service learning as pedagogy/philosophy. They also have developed a clearinghouse for volunteer needs that enhances communication and coordination with community partners and improves record keeping. Consequently, the staff play a vital role in utilizing its advisory board and increasing public awareness of the program. Service learning is embedded in the mission, values, sponsorship, and culture of USM as evidenced by the Service Learning Fair, the Service Learning Center Newsletter and website, and the expectation set for faculty in the Faculty Guide to Academic Service Learning.

2. What motivated you to develop or adopt this Innovative Practice?

With the academic emphasis on applied liberal arts, connections with the community for field experiences and practica are required. A *commitment to service to one's neighbor* is a key feature of the mission. A confluence of these two foci led to conceptualizing service learning and critical reflection as common threads throughout academic and co-curricular activities. A need for coordinating these academic and service goals with the needs and opportunities within the community led to establishing an office that would serve as a clearinghouse. Concurrently, Campus Compact selected the university as a participant for its national service learning initiative. Americorp/VISTA provided resources for coordinating this initiative.

3. How long did it take you to develop and implement this Innovative Practice?

Applied liberal arts and critical reflection became a centerpiece of curriculum as a result of the 2001 Comprehensive Curricular Initiative. Service Learning, as a targeted and related objective, began in 2004. 2005-2006 was the first full year of coordinated implementation with the service learning office, faculty training and support, record keeping, and agency evaluations.

4. What did it cost you to develop and implement this Innovative Practice?

Initial leadership was provided by Sharon (alum) and Tony Albers who contributed 18 months of service to the university, during which time they established the SL office and initiated its hallmark activities. They worked with the first VISTA volunteer to transition their leadership role. While these services were contributed, they represent approximately 2 full-time staff, computer resources, and office supplies.

5. What resistance did you face in developing and implementing this Innovative Practice, and how did you reduce or overcome it?

Resistance to service learning related to issues of academic rigor and logistical coordination. Some faculty expressed concern about whether service learning would advance academic objectives and be able to be integrated within course curriculum objectives. Issues of time were a concern in terms of arranging, supervising, and evaluating community placements. The faculty training on service learning overcame the resistance to issues related to rigor—the central role of critical reflection within service learning made evident academic relevance. The staff support in the SL office dissolved concerns about time for managing out of classroom experiences. The staff managed all of the logistics and several faculty testified that “they did everything!”

6. What does it cost you to maintain and operate this Innovative Practice, and what does it save you?

The SL office is managed by the Director of Career Services and a half-time Graduate Assistant who coordinates and manages the partnership and placement logistics and activities. A computer with database software is a required resource. The faculty liaison and service learning committee oversee service learning activities as a part of their committee load.

While not quantified, the savings in faculty and staff time are extensive. They do not have to engage in the constant communications required to set up and maintain partnership activities. They do not have to search for and modify resource materials; this is provided by the SL office.

7. How do you measure or check whether this Innovative Practice performs the way you intend it to?

The metrics used to measure effectiveness include analysis of student critical reflections, student/faculty evaluations; community partner evaluations; and type and hours of participation. These metrics provide information for systematic review of academic relevance and rigor, satisfaction with quality of involvement by all stakeholders; and analysis of experiences related to mission and goals.

8. What print or web documents are available to provide more detail and explanation about this Innovative Practice?

The weblink to the Service Learning homepage is http://www.stmary.edu/acad_service/ which provides extensive information on the program and captures visually service learning in action. Description of how service learning is embedded throughout the university's initiatives can be found at <http://www.stmary.edu/aqip/default.htm> in Category II Other Distinctive Objectives in the AQIP Systems Portfolio.

In addition to service learning being identified as a strength in the AQIP Systems Appraisal Feedback Report, the mayor of Leavenworth, KS issued a proclamation of “University of St. Mary Service Learning Week” and USM received a Presidential Honor Roll Recognition as part of Campus Compact’s 20th Anniversary celebration.

9. How does your organization currently use this Innovative Practice?

The University of Saint Mary (USM) is a private, not-for-profit Catholic, co-educational university sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (SCL). USM takes its distinct character from the educational mission as stated in the Constitution of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, and the Vincentian charism of our sponsors, that sees education as one of the great acts of charity, “serving others at the fullest points of their needs.” In this sense, USM has always shown flexibility in improving and changing to meet the needs of its neighbors, with respect for diversity of all kinds. This charism provides a context for USM’s *commitment to service to one’s neighbor* as a distinctive objective, derived from and informed by the Mission of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth.

Service Learning activities are initiated and coordinated by faculty, staff, and students. Faculty integrate activities within the academic curriculum; staff sponsor co-curricular activities often within athletics and mission trips. Students initiate activities through courses, clubs, and the student government association.

10. Whom at your organization should people should contact for more information or help about this Innovative Practice?

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