Waterloo ExL Community of Practice: Community Service Learning

The Community Service Learning Community is centred on the theme Crossing the Town/Gown Divide: Students' Learning for Good. The community is led by Dr. Kelly Anthony, Teaching Professor in the School of Public Health and Health Systems. In the complex field of public health, Kelly recognizes how giving student's an opportunity to directly experience the concepts they are learning and engage with practitioners can have a transformative impact on students.

This type of experiential learning can build relationships between students, institutions, and community and foster a sense of connectedness for all involved. However, the responsibility of building and maintaining these relationships often falls to individual faculty members. This Community was designed for faculty across campus who are engaging in, or are interested in exploring community service learning in their course(s) in ways that are mutually beneficial for students and the community partner. The findings of the Community are below.

The benefits of community service learning:

- Can be a transformative educational experience for students
- Learning outcomes supplemented with additional skill development such as communication, problem solving, and resiliency
  Authentic exposure to real world problems
- Higher student engagement driven by a desire to help

The challenges of community service learning:

- Can require additional work, time, and resources to prepare
- Requires all parties to move outside of their comfort zone
- Building relationships and understanding community sensitivity takes time
- Logistical challenges where students are leaving the classroom and going into the community
- Legal and ethical considerations
- Taking on an appropriate size project that can be completed within a term or take place over multiple terms

The opportunities associated with community service learning:

- Support students who want to work for good
- Provide students an opportunity to explore career options
- Make a difference in the community
- Each experience is unique so it keeps the course material fresh and engaging

Community Service Learning: Frequently Asked Questions

These responses are based on conversations from the Community of Practice and experience from Dr. Kelly Anthony. For more information, please read [CTE's Teaching Tip on Community-Based Learning](#).

What is Community Service Learning (CSL)?

Community Service Learning means incorporating real-life problems from the surrounding community into classroom learning. It can take a variety of forms, including having representatives from an organization come into the classroom to address the students, often in the form of a guest lecture. The representative may present a problem or need the organization is facing and students aim to provide solutions through their course work. Another method of CSL involves the students leaving the classroom and conduct their learning at the community organization's location or another location to engage with the population they serve.

Why is Community Service Learning meaningful to education?

CSL is a transformative experience for many students, where they are able to connect their learning to real-world situation. The reality is, our students are highly interested in this type of learning. It provides opportunities for students to develop skills beyond the course material, such as communication and problem solving and explore potential career options. CSL also helps students reflect on their own experiences and consider their relationship with the broader community. A key aspect of CSL is to create mutually beneficial partnerships where students can add a benefit to their community, often serving under-resourced organizations and people.

I'm interested in Community Service Learning, where should I start?

Any course requires a lot of advanced planning, and taking on this type of project may seem overwhelming at first. Start with yourself as the instructor. Considering some questions on a personal level:

- Why am I interested in helping the community?
- How have I been involved in the community so far? In what areas could I expand my involvement?
- Am I ready to move out of my teaching comfort zone? (e.g. become more flexible about the content delivery and outcomes)
- Do I have time to manage the additional logistics?
- How will I inspire my students if they are hesitant about the activity?
- Is there any additional training I need?
- What resources are available to me? If I need support, who could I ask? If I identify a resource gap, how do I get extra resources?

Once you've answered some of these questions, you can move onto thinking about exploring partnerships and ways partners might be integrated into your course (continue reading to learn more).

What are perceived barriers to Community Service Learning? How might I overcome some of these barriers?

Many of the barriers associated with CSL are perceived. Something to keep in mind is that it may take time to overcome a barrier and it could take different approaches to reach your desired result.

Barrier: Finding community partners

- Explore your personal and professional networks. Leverage what you have existing.
- Inquire within your department if there is an alumni network.
- Ask your students if they are currently volunteering the local community. Can they find their own partners?
- Look for opportunities and organizations to partner with on campus.
- Reach out to organizations you're interested in partnering with.
- Understand key community issues by read the newspaper or local publications.

Barrier: the logistics are too complicated

- Any course takes planning, the planning for this type of course will look different. Think about investing time now and simplifying the process for future iterations of the course.
- Have the partner come into the classroom.
- Pilot with a small group of student by using the CSL component as an opt-in project.

Barrier: students aren't interested in this type of experience

- Think about the assumptions that students have: what knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs
- Develop a value-proposition for the experience
- Set expectations for the students
- Find the right time in the course to integrate the community partner
- How can students be prepared for the experience through in-class activities, readings, or engaging with other materials?

What are the logistical considerations?

The logistical considerations can vary, from simple (do I need to create groups?) to highly complex (arranging travel to a third-party location).

Do I need ethics approval?

In some cases, yes and in many cases, no.

Although it can be extra work, it's an important step minimize the risks such as breach of confidentiality, which is especially critical as CSL can involve vulnerable populations. The Office of Research provides resources to help determine if your require ethics approval. If you have an idea for a CSL project that involves research or collecting data, contact the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Review the presentation from the Office of Research Ethics at the Waterloo ExL Institute

How can I be sure that students are learning what they are supposed to be learning?

As with any course, your CSL course will have clearly defined learning outcomes. Take time to consider where the CSL experience aligns with the learning outcomes. This might mean striking

a delicate balance between the learning outcomes, the types of possible experiences, what students want, and what would be beneficial for the community partner.

Kelly shares an example where students in a course on death and dying created resources for a retirement centre. She determined what deliverables aligned with the learning outcomes and the needs of the community partner. The students completed the assignments considering the real audience of the elderly residents and their families to consider how the execution and implementation of these materials may change.

How do I assess Community Service Learning projects?

The CSL experience can be non-linear and unpredictable. However, similar to many other types of assessments, you should still measure the learning that you want to achieve.

- Evaluate the process, rather than the outcome. Students can create a group contract or learning contract with the community partner. The contract should contain work plans and deliverables, with milestones build in. How well was the contract followed? How did the students course-correct if necessary?
- Use the experience as a practice of course material and have students complete reflective writing assignments
- Break down a large assignment into many small assignments so students have opportunities to integrate their learning as they go through the experience. Be sure to incorporate timely and constructive feedback.
- Consider peer-driven assessments such as Peer Assessment, Evaluation, and Review (PEAR).

How can I find community partners?

This was a frequent conversation at our Community of Practice meetings. Instructors all agreed that finding an appropriate partner can be a challenging, but it is a rewarding part of the process. The message was clear, from those who have lived in Waterloo for years and those new to the area, that you must always be on the lookout for partners. A partner may fall into your lap, but this is still likely because you are in the community yourself looking for opportunities.

To recap, some ways to find community partners are:

- Explore your personal and professional networks. Leverage what you have existing.
- Inquire within your department if there is an alumni network.
- Ask your students if they are currently volunteering the local community. Can they find their own partners?
- Look for opportunities and organizations to partner with on campus.
- Reach out to organizations you're interested in partnering with.
- Understand key community issues by read the newspaper or local publications. Attend local events and visit the library.

How do I develop relationships with community partners in the context of CSL?

- Let them know in advance when they might be asked to participate. This might include sharing what term the course runs and what weeks they might need to be involved.
- Establish clear communication (e.g. do they prefer email or phone communication?) and keep regular contact even if you are not currently working on a project. Check in to see how things are going for their organization in general and explore future opportunities.

- Keep the barriers low for the partner, such as mitigating costs (e.g. providing a parking pass if they have to come campus) and limiting the advanced preparation on their part.
- Have a back-up plan should they need to cancel last minute. Community service work can be unpredictable and they may be called away.
- Set expectations with the partner. Recognize if some onboarding is required to help them understand the skills students have and how the might be able to help.

Questions[1] to consider when integrating community service learning into your classroom:

- What learning outcome(s) does the community service learning component address?
- What concepts (for example, theories, methods, models, content) will students use in the experience?
- How does the community service learning experience relate to other aspects of the course?
- What organization will I partner with? How will I establish and develop this relationship? How can I set the partner's expectations?
- What logistical considerations are required? Will students be leaving the classroom, if so when and how will they get there? Who will supervise them in the community? Will the partner come into the classroom, if so when will this occur and what will they be required to do?
- Does the experience require materials or software? How will I obtain these resources? Do I need additional support?
- How are students involved in the CSL opportunity? Will every student get an opportunity to participate or only a select group? Is there an option for students to opt-out? How does each role change the overall course experience for each student?
- What is the instructor's role during the experience?
- How are the students prepared for the experience? How will I set expectations for students?
- Is there an opportunity for the students to debrief from the experience? When does the debrief occur? Describe how the debrief is facilitated (for example, in-class, assignment, or online discussion).
- Are students graded or is there an assessment associated with the experience? If so, how much is the assignment worth? Will I obtain feedback from the community partner?

---

[1] Questions are adapted from the *Waterloo ExL Institute* and the *Waterloo Assessment Institute Guide for Participants*.