

Four Myths About Academic Service-Learning

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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.

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.

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.

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, 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.

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 experience must be considered in the context of, and integrated with, the other planned learning strategies and resources in the course.