

# Four Myths About Academic Service-Learning\*

**T**o 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.

**Myth # 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.

**Myth # 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.

**Myth # 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 (Kolb, 1984), 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.

**Myth # 4 - The Myth of Marginality: Academic service-learning is the addition of community service to a traditional course.**

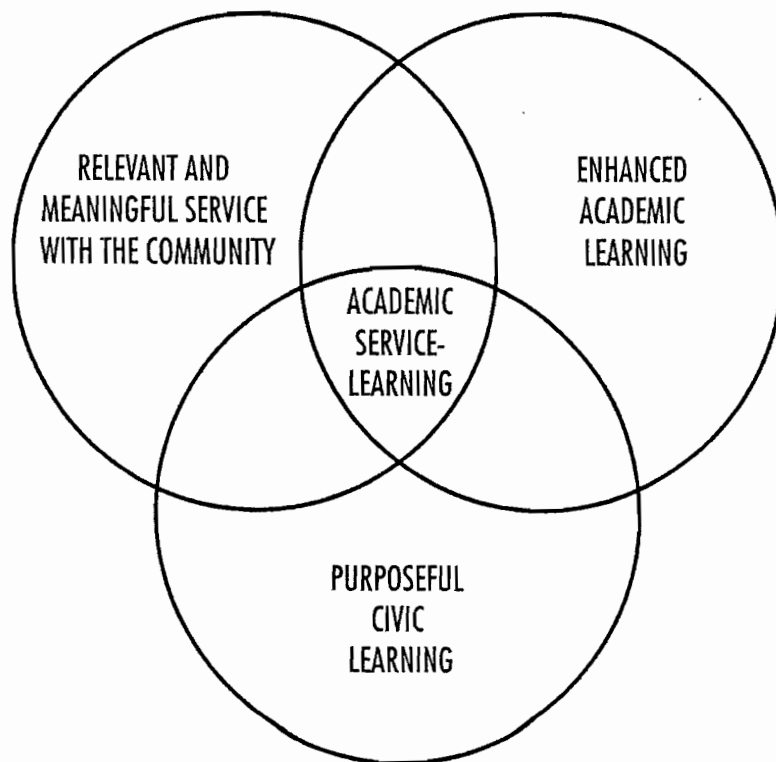
Grafting a community service requirement (or option) onto an otherwise unchanged academic course does not constitute academic service-learning. While such models abound, this interpretation marginalizes the learning in, from, and with the community, and precludes transforming students' community experiences into learning. To realize service-learning's full potential as a pedagogy, community experiences must be considered in the context of, and integrated with, the other planned learning strategies and resources in the course.

\* The designation of these four myths first appeared in: Howard, J. (2000). Academic Service-Learning: Myths, Challenges, and Recommendations. *Essays on Teaching Excellence*, 12 (3). A publication of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. They appear here with the permission of the editor, Kay Herr Gillespie.

# Three Necessary Criteria for Academic Service-Learning

**A**s reflected in the Venn diagram below, three criteria serve as the litmus test for whether a course may be considered service-learning:

- (1) Relevant and Meaningful Service With the Community - there must be service provided in the community that is both relevant and meaningful to all stakeholder parties. We amplify on this first necessary criterion on pages 23-24.
- (2) Enhanced Academic Learning - the addition of relevant and meaningful service with the community must not only serve the community but also enhance student academic learning in the course. We amplify on this second necessary criterion on page 26.
- (3) Purposeful Civic Learning - the addition of relevant and meaningful service with the community must not only serve the community and enhance student academic learning in the course, but also directly and intentionally prepare students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society. We amplify on this third necessary criterion on pages 38-39.



All three criteria are necessary for a course to qualify as academic service-learning. If any of the three is absent, then it is either another form of community-based service and/or learning or an underachieving model of academic service-learning.

It is important to note that while service-learning courses may have other learning objectives and/or outcomes, such as in the social or affective domains, these are not *necessary* conditions for academic service-learning.

The bulk of the remainder of this workbook is devoted to these three criteria: amplifying on their meaning, and offering a planning process to establish learning objectives, learning strategies, and student learning assessment methods.

Matrix 1 below further illustrates the distinctiveness of academic service-learning relative to some other community-based student experiences.

<b>MATRIX 1</b>	<b>Distinguishing Characteristics of Some Common Student Community-Based Experiences</b>		
	<b>Community Service</b>	<b>Enhanced Academic Learning</b>	<b>Purposeful Civic Learning</b>
<b>Volunteering or Community Service</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Co-Curricular Service-Learning</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Academic Service-Learning</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Internship</b>	Yes*	Yes	No

\* Not all internships involve service in the community.

We now turn to a set of foundational resources that inform the overall service-learning course planning process.