

The Impact of Service-Learning on Student Learning and Civic Engagement



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is a high-impact practice that connects academic coursework and co-curricular programs with community-identified needs, creating transformative outcomes for students, institutions, and community partners. Service-learning has been widely recognized as a pedagogical approach that enhances student learning, retention, and civic responsibility by promoting active, experiential participation in community-based activities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Kuh, 2008). This poster demonstrates how service-learning, thoughtfully integrated into courses and co-curricular programs through the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE), supports academic success while deepening students' self-awareness, sense of efficacy, and civic responsibility.

PROBLEMS ADDRESSED

Traditional classroom instruction in higher education often limits opportunities for students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. Without structured service-learning implementation and critical reflection exercises, students struggle to understand societal challenges, identify their own values and interests, develop professional skills and soft skills, and gain confidence to take action that makes a difference post-graduation. Service-learning addresses these challenges by creating opportunities for students to apply academic knowledge in community service while promoting classroom learning, retention, and engagement through action-based learning experiences (Brunson-Pitt, 2021; Celio et al., 2011).

IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning is a form of experiential learning that integrates course content, community goals, service, and critical reflection to promote knowledge transfer. Participation in community engagement activities has been associated with enhanced critical thinking, self-awareness, professional development, and civic responsibility. By embedding service-learning across academic and co-curricular programs, institutions can promote meaningful student learning while advancing community-identified needs and goals. Additionally, participation in service-learning has been shown to strengthen students' sense of belonging with peers, faculty, the university and local community. These are critical factors influencing student persistence and success. (Ho et al., 2025; York & Fernandez, 2018).

CCE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Civic Responsibility: Understanding issues in the community and the responsibility of citizens to participate in the democratic process and work toward positive change in society.

Self Awareness and Efficacy: Identifying one's own values and interests; respecting and appreciating the perspectives and life situations of others; and gaining confidence to take action that makes a difference.

Academic Success: Acquiring and strengthening knowledge by applying academic concepts to real issues in the community, leading to success in the classroom and development of professional skills.



WSU student volunteering at Bishop Place Senior Living.

METHOD AND PROCESS

The CCE collaborates with faculty and staff across all campuses to thoughtfully design and implement service-learning projects that align with both course and program learning goals, student interest areas, and community-identified needs. At the beginning of every semester, the CCE facilitates in-class and remote presentations to all service-learning courses to orient students to the service-learning process, GivePulse platform, and community partnership process. CCE tracks student participation, manages risk, and provides faculty with participation reports at least twice per semester. CCE staff are available to provide individual assistance and troubleshooting to support faculty, staff, students, and community partners. The CCE assumes responsibility for logistical and administrative coordination, allowing faculty to direct their efforts toward course content and fostering student critical reflection.

Multiple service-learning models are implemented, including:

- **Individual Volunteer Placements** — self-directed volunteer experience
- **Course Projects** — course-embedded service project
- **One Day Projects** — Global and Pullman 9/11 Day of Service and National Days of Service
- **Co-curricular Programs** — Cougs Lead, Public Square, Cougs Vote, and the Global Cougar Leadership Program

STUDENT LEARNING GAINS

Service-learning provides opportunities for hands-on, community-based learning aligned with course objectives and institutional strategic goals. Students develop both academic and professional soft skills through the meaningful application of their work to address real community needs, including:

Academic Skills

- Critical thinking and applied problem-solving
- Written and oral communication
- Research and analysis within real-world contexts
- Application of course concepts to community-identified challenges

Soft Skills

- Empathy and social responsibility
- Collaboration and teamwork with diverse groups
- Leadership and personal efficacy
- Sense of connection and belonging within the broader community



WSU student decorated bags for youth at a food pantry.

STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS

1. Civic Responsibility

Students' reflection statements demonstrated their service-learning experiences strengthened their understanding of community issues, civic participation, and the importance of contributing to collective well-being through direct engagement with social, policy, and service-oriented activities.

- "It was amazing to gather and meet individuals from other WSU campuses... learning about Martin Luther King Jr. and having the opportunity to write a card to foster children."
- "I helped students sign up to vote, print out their ballots, explain the voting process, and assist with supplies. I learned so much while volunteering that will help me in future elections. I look forward to volunteering again, especially in the next midterm and presidential elections."
- "I got to see public policy advocates in action... helping participants rehearse testimony and observing bill presentations. Poverty is a system, and so are the resources. I saw how poverty can be changed and how others fight for it."
- "The food drive was an eye-opening experience, highlighting the importance of community support... knowing that our collective efforts would provide nourishment and hope to those in need."

2. Self-Awareness and Efficacy

Students' reflection statements demonstrated their service-learning experiences increased their confidence, deepened their appreciation for collaboration, and expanded their awareness of their own roles in contributing meaningfully within diverse settings.

- "My experience with GAL (Group Action Learning) training has been quite impactful... I began to appreciate the power of collaboration and collective problem-solving."
- "On my first day volunteering, I felt an incredible sense of fulfillment as I was able to give back to the community by dedicating my time to those in need."
- "My service-learning experience connects to my long-term goals because the communication skills I am developing will assist me in my future career in vet med. I will need to be able to effectively communicate with my coworkers, clients, and possibly zoo/sanctuary guests."
- "The most valuable service the Humane Society has offered me is the opportunity to learn from real experiences and connect with people whose lives and perspectives are different from mine."

3. Academic Success

Students' reflection statements showed that their service-learning experiences linked civic engagement to real-world applications, enhancing their academic understanding, critical thinking, problem-solving, and professional skill development.

- "I was able to learn about a process to more efficiently burn waste to create usable charcoal..."
- "Volunteering in a 5th-grade classroom also taught me the value of flexibility and adaptability in teaching. I observed that not every lesson goes as planned, and being able to adjust on the fly is essential for keeping students engaged and ensuring their understanding. Whether it was changing the approach to a difficult concept or adjusting the pacing to better suit the class"
- "I had the opportunity to both volunteer with an organization I care about but to also see how my knowledge from this class affects the laws in our state."
- "I learned that flexibility can make a big difference in the effectiveness of instruction. This experience has shown me that teaching is not just about delivering content; it's about meeting students where they are and helping them grow both academically and personally."

Spring 2025 - Service-learning

Campus	Engaged Students	Community Projects	Verified Hours	EST Economic Impact
Pullman	2783	354	37677.8	1,571,164.26
Global	60	28	670.42	27,956.51

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Community partners report an increase in organizational capacity, strengthened university partnerships, and expanded service impact through student engagement. Student volunteer contributions generated measurable economic value, with volunteer service estimated at **\$41.70 per hour in Washington State**, further demonstrating the broader societal impact of service-learning.



WSU volunteers at Three Creeks Post Acute & Pullman Community Garden



WSU student participating in the Pen friends project at a local elementary school.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning is a meaningful and impactful component of academic and co-curricular programming. Service-learning supports student development and academic success, while strengthening reciprocal university-community partnerships. Service-learning frameworks can effectively promote professional development, social responsibility, and sense of belonging across diverse campus contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Service Learning (SL) is open to all classes and student groups.
- Documented record of service with verified service hours available to students for professional portfolios, and resumes.
- Faculty and staff support for course integration of service-learning ensures successful implementation.



WSU students volunteering at an animal sanctuary.



Mechanical Engineering students design a wheelchair obstacle course.