

The Service-Learning Center: A Link in the Chain

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The major functions of the Service-Learning Center (SLC), the Student Affairs arm of the Service-Learning Writing Project at Michigan State University, are to inform and prepare all MSU students for career and civic involvement through community service. In 1994-95, the SLC coordinated nearly one thousand community agency placements for over 3,000 students. Proven benefits of community-linked educational experiences for students include greatly enhanced career exploration opportunities, skills development, curriculum enrichment, as well as values and moral development.

Since the philosophy of service-learning is based on meeting both the learning needs of students and a needed community service, the SLC connects the university, students, and community agencies, helping to recruit, train, orient, supervise, and evaluate student involvement in community organizations. Students are placed through the SLC for non-credit experiences as well as for credit internships through some academic departments. The SLC also provides support services for academic units and special curriculum initiatives like the cutting-edge SLWP by coordinating openings in community-based programs, and by interviewing and preparing students to find meaningful placements.

The administrative functions of the SLC seek to insure, above all, a safe and civil learning environment for students working and learning in the community, and to facilitate the academic success and retention of MSU students while promoting their social and personal development. SLC-sponsored activities also help build community within diversity at Michigan State. Those students who take advantage of opportunities to learn about another culture through programs like International Interactions report significant increases in their ability to understand, appreciate, and work with different people. Students also recognize that their perception of the "world" may indeed be different from others'.

Getting Personal

At a large public university, opportunities to engage in service projects go a long way to personalize the otherwise anonymous feel of the university experience. Whether serving in soup kitchens, building a Habitat house, tutoring, or working with young children in shelters, students create bonds of friendship and commitment that last throughout their colle-

What Is Service-Learning?

The concept of service-learning refers to service opportunities which enable students to integrate academic work with community service. As a resource center and support service for students and academic units, Michigan State University's Service-Learning Center (SLC) develops the local community placements and assists students in program selection.

Why Volunteer?

Quality community experiences provide students with opportunities to:

- help others
- apply their skills and knowledge
- develop leadership skills
- communicate with different populations
- explore career options
- gain experience
- learn civic responsibility
- help solve problems
- gain exposure to cultural and economic differences
- explore values or ethical issues
- apply research and problem-solving skills

giate careers.

An interesting and welcome by-product of student involvement in community life is a renewed commitment among SLC students to local campus life and campus initiatives that enhance the quality of life for all MSU students, including initiatives that promote community and address issues such as safety, hunger, and health.

Learning by Joining in

Service-learning is a unique form of experiential education that requires students' active involvement in public issues and community needs. To that end, the SLC crafts placement positions in which students provide direct services to youth, assist non-profit organizations with administrative and financial support, serve as advocates or mentors, research issues and develop policy. Many service-learning placements are integrated with university courses. Some courses, like those sponsored by the SLWP, grant General Education credit for academic work undertaken with a direct service component. In 1994-95, those positions spanned the following areas:

- pre-professional internships and field work
- education, special education, youth mentors, and pre-school programs
- health and nutrition
- student leadership initiatives
- human services and mental health
- state and national government internships

Getting Closer, Together

Careful, thoughtful, and structured reflection on the part of students makes service work a dynamic educational process. For that reason alone, the SLC celebrates its partnership with the SLWP and applauds its efforts to enhance students' critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving skills. To create a context for one's academic effort and ethical enrichment is what most of reflection is about. Understanding the relationships between individual aspirations and the needs of other groups, cities, nations, and cultures requires thought and discussion made possible by the curriculum materials and initiatives devised by SLWP faculty and staff. If we are to successfully reach beyond our individual actions to look for solutions or changes that will improve our communities, our campuses and ourselves, we must deliberately pair action with reflection in such creative ways. After all, "Visions, like objects in the distance, get clearer as we move toward them."

What Are Placements Like?

Undergraduate and graduate students are placed in programs available through the Service-Learning Center. Programs require different time commitments and levels of skill. Students participate in the following settings:

- schools and community centers
- hospitals, clinics, and veterinary clinics
- museums, theaters, nature centers, and galleries
 - associations and non-profit organizations
 - city and state government
- youth organizations, churches, pre-school centers
- shelters, group and residential homes, soup kitchens
 - business offices and television studios
 - nursing homes and senior centers
 - correctional facilities and courts
- recreation centers, gyms, and playgrounds