

# List of Key Considerations

© St Cloud Area Service-Learning Coalition (February 15, 2006)

**Introduction:** One of the goals of the St Cloud Area Service-Learning Coalition is “to provide a checklist of steps that staff can follow when setting up a service-learning activity.”

At the coalition meeting on November 7, 2005, participants brainstormed possible steps. The list was discussed further at the coalition’s meeting on February 15, 2006, with an eye to identifying those steps that tend not to receive sufficient attention. (A summary of that discussion is pasted to the end of the list as an appendix.)

The consensus among participants was that the steps it identified were valuable to keep in mind, but that there was concern that we not allow them to become barriers to possible activities just because one/a few of the steps were not addressed. Thus, it is referred to a "List of Key Considerations”.

Coalition members are encouraged to use it as a general guideline in their own work, and to share it with others.

It is also important for coalition members to continue to treat this document as a “work in progress” – paying attention to ideas or wording within it that need further clarification or revision, and to other steps that ought to be added.

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**Before you contact a potential partnering organization, please be sure you have:**

- identified the initial goals that you have for your service-learning activity, which address:
  - the desired impact on the people/organization with whom you seek to work
  - the desired learning/personal growth of your students (and adult mentors)
- secured sufficient “buy-in” from potential student-participants (and adult mentors) (*see Appendix*)
- obtained necessary support from the administration of your organization
- identified potential sources for funding and other material resources
- identified the time-frame (for preparation as well as the actual service-activities) (*see Appendix*) [Note: Time-lines can vary considerably, depending on the activity and the organizations involved]

**In your initial conversation with the staff member(s) from a potential partnering organization, please be sure to address the following:**

- share about your organization (including your students and their mentors) and goals, and ask about their organization's goals and primary activities
- offer the ideas you have about possible activities, and ask them for other possibilities as well
- clarify financial/material resources that would be needed
- clarify the level of adult supervision needed
- inquire about application and orientation procedures, and any liability forms that need to be signed
- explain the process you envision for preparing your students (and mentors), and ask for their input about that process as well
- explore possible dates for actual service-activities

**Once a plan of collaboration has been developed with the staff member(s) of the partnering organization(s), it is essential to establish the following:**

- develop clearly articulated goals for the service-learning activity
- obtain the definite commitment of a sufficient number of adult mentors
- identify specific times and strategies for engaging participants in guided reflection before and following the service-activity, as well as during the activity itself (*see Appendix*)
- obtain the necessary permission from parents/guardians
- provide the necessary background information about your participants to the partnering organization(s) [e.g. application forms completed; criminal background checks completed]
- obtain the necessary funding and other material resources in order to accomplish the project

## Appendix

The following issues were raised/discussed at 2/15/06 meeting.

### **Re: “securing sufficient student buy-in”**

A set of challenges occur when students are required to do a service-learning activity (rather than just having it as an option).

- Faculty or faith-community staff who require service-learning activities need to recognize that just requiring a service-learning activity and giving students a list of potential organizations with whom they can do such activities does not adequately address the motivational issues involved. They must be sure that students understand the connection between such activities and the goal of the class/program. They must also be attentive and responsive to signs of student resistance.
- When community-partners are invited to speak about service-learning opportunities available for students, it is important for them to be told whether service-learning is being required or just offered as an option.
- Community partners can assess and address the level of student buy-in through the orientation process (e.g. by asking why the student is doing the activity, and what goals the student wants to achieve)

Note: Raising these concerns about requiring service-learning does not mean that coalition members are opposed to such requirements.

One coalition member shared that, in her experience, students for whom it is a requirement tend to follow-through more with their commitment than when it is optional.

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There is a segment of students who choose to become involved in service-learning because they want it to build their resume. Community partners can assess and address this motivation in the orientation process.

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Negotiating student commitment is a key step in the orientation process. It is important for clear expectations about student performance to be made and agreed upon at the beginning of the service-learning experience.

Once this commitment is established, it is easier for community partners to support students' follow-through on commitments. Community partners should not worry about the impact that reporting those concerns may have on a student's grades. One of the key outcomes for students is the development of a sense of connection and accountability to the wider community; enabling lack of responsibility to continue unaddressed contradicts that outcome.

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Another dimension of securing sufficient student buy-in is the importance of school and faith-community based staff surrendering some of the control they may be used to having in other forms of teaching/learning. Authentic service-learning requires that students play a significant role in the selection and design of the activity, have leadership responsibilities in the activity itself and in the follow-up to it (e.g. assessment, affirmation/celebration, documenting and sharing the story).

### **Re: time-frame**

It is important that the amount of time for the process (including “preparation” and “follow-up/closure” as well as the service activity itself) be sufficient to establish a foundation of understanding of the community organization and the people with whom it works.

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When schools and faith-communities approach community organizations, they need to be conscious of whether their own time-frame (e.g. when they introduce the service-learning activity, and by when it must be completed) is compatible with the time-frame of the community organization (e.g. when orientation can occur, when staff have time to participate).

Likewise, when community organizations approach a school or faith community, they need to be conscious of the time-frame in which the latter are operating.

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It is important for partners to communicate about the calendars with which each is dealing (e.g. when vacations in the school year are; when programs or academic terms begin and end, and when key testing and grading times may be; when the community organization has its busiest times).

### **Re: the process of guided reflection**

A key question is “who has responsibility for guiding the reflection process?” School and faith-community staff sometimes feel that asking community partners to participate in that process is an additional burden. However, community partners often feel a need to participate in it – and bring particular expertise to the process. So it’s important for all partners in the process to discuss how and when guided reflection will occur (“before” and “during” as well as “after” the service activity).

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Three key areas on which reflection can/should focus are:

- academic (or in the case of faith-communities, faith content): while school/faith community-based staff feel particularly well-equipped in this area, it’s important to consider the knowledge/experience of the community partners

- personal awareness/development: monitoring and mentoring this area requires a solid relational base with the student, and can be done by whomever has such a connection with her/him
- civic (includes an understanding of the organization and the issues it's addressing, and the wider community): while community partners are particularly well-equipped in this area, it is important for the school/faith-community based staff to demonstrate interest in it, as well

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Two strategies that coalition members have found useful:

- (*by community partners*) integrating reflection times into the time(s) in which students are on-site, and including the time devoted to that process in the overall time total for the activity
- (*by school and faith-base staff*) inviting community partners to sit in on, and even assist in the design and facilitation of, guided reflection sessions in the school or faith-community