Writing the Community Engaged Course Syllabus

Well-designed community engaged scholarship courses integrate course content, academic learning objectives, meaningful outcomes for community partners, and students' reflective thoughts about their civic agency and responsibility. Research on student learning is clear about the importance of being transparent with students about our learning goals and our course design. When students see the plan, they can play a role in making that plan work for themselves, facilitating their own learning.

The syllabus is the primary way to communicate our learning goals and course design to students. The syllabus should give them a clear understanding of how the service activities, class reflection discussions, and assignments have been designed for more transformative learning.

Sample syllabus language is provided throughout this guide. You are welcome to adapt it to fit your context and course.

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Course Description: Addressing Student Perception of Value

Expectancy Value Theory (Eccles, 1983) has been used for many years to inform how course goals and expectations are described in our syllabi. The theory indicates the predictors of students' motivation to do well: value and expectancy.

Value. Students perceive that the course content, projects, and assignments have value. To what extent do students believe what they will do in this course is useful, interesting, enjoyable, and relevant to their lives?

Expectancy. Students believe they can be successful in this course. Are the assignment expectations and methods of assessment made clear enough that the students can imagine themselves completing each step successfully?

Community engaged courses are well-suited to address both value and expectancy. Application of course concepts to inform community engagement work demonstrates the relevance and usefulness of the course content for creating real community benefit. Studies have also shown that pedagogical practices like community engaged scholarship increase self-efficacy for all students, with even larger positive gains for women and students of color (Kuh, 2009).

While students experience value and expectancy as the course progresses, they may not predict these outcomes initially. Depending on their prior service-learning experiences, some students may anticipate that the service will be an additional hoop to jump through rather than an integral part of their learning. Other students, having less experience with service, may be overwhelmed by our expectations. A well-written syllabus can address these and other concerns.

The course description should mention the community engagement project and make clear how this experience will facilitate learning of the course objectives. It should be clear to students why you have chosen to include community engagement in the course, and how this learning experience has been woven into the rest of the course design.

A statement of Community Engaged Scholarship helps students understand what community engaged scholarship is and its core principles. The Nashman Center website provides our definition and standards of community engaged scholarship, which you are welcome to quote or link to in your syllabus.

In order to communicate that the community engagement experience is integral to the course, not an unrelated extra assignment, we recommend addressing it throughout the syllabus, not as an addendum.

Sample Syllabus Language

What is Community Engaged Scholarship? This course is designated as a "Community Engaged Scholarship Course," which means it involves collaboration between the instructor, students, and partner community organizations to address a community goals. The community engagement in this course will make the learning more relevant and challenging as students will connect their knowledge and skills to real, complex, community concerns. These experiences are integrated into course assignments, to facilitate learning of my academic course objectives, as well as your reflection on civic responsibility and your sense of purpose in the world.

Assignments and Assessment: Addressing Student Expectancy

Knowing what to expect is of particular concern for students who are new to community engagement. The following Syllabus Construction Checklist (Ballard and Elmore, 2009) clarifies the community engagement expectations of the course.

- What will students do? What will be their roles and responsibilities?
- With whom? (Individually or in student teams? Who is their community contact?)
- Where (including directions and public transportation options)?
- When and for how long? (Provide timelines. When should the service start and when should it be completed? Are minimum hours required?)
- Why? Which course learning objectives are addressed by this engagement?
- How does their community engagement intersect with other elements of the course? (Class discussions, course assignments, etc.)
- How will students demonstrate what they have learned from their community-engagement? How will these assignments be assessed?
- What if? What are the potential risks?

For courses in which students engage more individually, many of the above items are better addressed by maximizing your course page on Givepulse. By affiliating with pre-selected community partners, students can link to the details of each service project available to them in order to choose a project that fits their interests and availability.

Clarifying Assignment Expectations: How will Students be Assessed?

It is a standard of practice that students not be assigned a grade for the completion of service hours but for demonstrated learning from that experience. The assignments and standards of quality that will be used to assess that work must be made clear in the syllabus, and in more detail in the assignment description.

In the case of direct service, students are often required to complete a certain number of service hours (20 hours is typical for a 15-week semester, but the Nashman Center has no required minimum). This assignment is analogous to assigned readings: students do not receive points for completing the reading, nor does completing the required service hours result in a grade (although some instructors weave the completed service hours into a class participation grade). Student learning from their service is better assessed through assignments which require students to draw upon their service experiences, connect them to readings and classroom discussions, think critically and reflectively, and make meaningful conclusions that demonstrate the course learning objectives.

In the case of indirect service projects, students are often required to create a deliverable for the community partner, e.g. a database, written materials, training curriculum, research

project, policy-analysis paper, or business plan. In these cases, student performance on the product itself, potentially including feedback from the community partner, is used for learning assessment and is factored into the course grade. It is critical to be clear about the standards of quality and expectations regarding the scope of the project, and indicate in advance the extent to which the community partner feedback will factor into the grading.

Optional Assignments. Every effort should be made to provide a community engagement experience that is a reasonable option for all students, including, for example, students with disabilities or students with scheduling restraints due to family or work responsibilities. However, on rare occasions, a student will be unable to participate in the community engaged element of a course. While it may or may not appear on the syllabus, be prepared with an alternative assignment that is equivalent in effort and addresses the same course learning goals. Library research papers or class presentations on relevant topics are a typical option.

Dissemination of Scholarship. As scholarly work, community engaged scholarship should include dissemination of what was learned. This assignment can be a culminating assignment or a lower stakes endeavor aimed at final meaning-making and closure.
- A final report or presentation given to community partners
- Video-recorded reflections to be shared with students in the course next year.
- Final research or reflection paper assignments designed with publication guidelines in mind. Several academic journals focus on student community engagement.
- Submissions for the Nashman Center blog or podcast series, in which students describe project outcomes for their partners as well as their own learning outcomes.

Community Partners/Projects: Balancing Challenge and Support

Much of student learning theory is grounded in the concept of achieving balance between challenge and support (Sanford, 1967). Student learning is diminished when there is so much support that they are not challenged to do their own problem solving. Neither can students learn when they are challenged to the point of anxiety without a balance of support.

Student Anxiety   Student Support

For many courses, learning to navigate the ambiguity of a community-based project is part of the challenge that fosters learning. However, given the larger context of our current times, including COVID-19, threats to people of color, and to our democratic processes, it is important

to acknowledge that student anxiety is already high. For now, we should plan to adapt course design to provide as much support as possible.

Support = Structure. One powerful support available in course design is providing structure: breaking down tasks into smaller steps, providing deadlines, practicing skills through in-class activities before using them independently on projects. For now, we recommend providing abundant guidelines and instructions, rather than making the "ability to handle ambiguity" a learning outcome. (To be clear, previous to 2020, this was a valid learning outcome for community engagement, and an important competency for the college educated person).

High-Structure Approaches to Community Partner Placement

If the course context allows it, we highly recommend pre-selecting community partners for your students to work with. Some faculty provide a list of partner options for students to choose from. In other courses, students rank their choices and the instructor assigns the placements, ensuring that all partners receive the number of students they need. In either approach, the Nashman Center Course Guide can assist and Givepulse provides the online platform for collecting and sharing the needed information.

If learning how to find a community organization and co-create a mutually beneficial project is tied to the course learning goals, then the syllabus should provide structure for that process. Prepare students by making your expectations for the project and the nature of the partnership clear. Allow time in class to provide instruction on how to locate an organization and practice communicating the goals of the project to organization staff. Set a deadline for students to submit their proposed project that allows review and approval before they begin their work.

Once community partner placements have been made, students should learn about the partner organization, the community it serves, and the issue(s) it addresses. This might involve inviting guest speakers to present during class time. Alternatively, students can complete a small, high-structured assignment prompting them to learn about their partner organization's history, mission, programs, staffing, the community being served (demographics, resources available, local governance), and the social issue being addressed.

Similarly, practical information should be either provided or students should be instructed to collect it: names and contact information of key staff, public transportation instructions, hours of operation, dates of orientation or training, and other pre-service requirements such as police background checks or finger-printing. Givepulse helps provide much of this information. We recommend using this platform to facilitate communication between instructors, students, and community partners.

A well-made course page on the Givepulse platform can be your best source of structure and support. Work with the Nashman Center staff and your Course Guide to be sure your course page is affiliated with all potential community partners. This makes it easy for students to click through and learn about the organizations and the service project available.

Practicalities and Logistics: Syllabus Excepts to Use/Adapt

Nashman's Student Guide to Community Engaged Scholarship Courses
The Honey W. Nashman Center provides support to students in community engaged scholarship courses like this one. One useful resource is their *Student Guide to Community Engaged Scholarship Courses*, which is available at http://go.gwu.edu/cesstudentguide and is linked to from our Givepulse Course Page. This guide provides a step-by-step process to help you get started with service, a list of issues to be sure you discuss with your community partner (e.g. whether background checks or training are required before you begin). It also includes a valuable list of tips to help you stay safe as you serve, and what to do if you have an accident or need to report a concern.

Waiver and Release Agreement Form
Since you will be serving on-site in the community for this project, it is necessary that you complete a Waiver and Release Agreement Form before you do. The form is completed on-line and is available on our Givepulse Course Page. In class we will discuss the potential risks involved in these service projects, as well as important way for you to stay safe.

Reporting Service Activities: Givepulse
For this course, students should plan to serve a minimum of 20 hours with their partner organization. Your transportation time to and from the service site does not "count" toward this requirement, but orientation/training provided by the partner organization, and any research or preparation you do to serve effectively does.

Givepulse is the online platform we use for students to report service activities so I can confirm you have met the course requirement. Our Givepulse Course Page is at this link: [insert link to YOUR course http://GWServes.givepulse.com]. An instructional video and a written guide for reporting service on Givepulse are provided here: http://go.gwu.edu/cesstudentguide.

Note that the Givepulse "impact report" includes several optional items, such as reflections, notes, or uploaded photos. I do not require that you complete any of these options. Your graded reflection assignments in this course should be submitted on Blackboard with your other assignments, not on Givepulse. I do however recommend that you make brief field notes (a sentence or two) each time you report service on Givepulse. It improves your reflections to have a reminder of what you did and observed throughout the semester.

When to report your service activities (weekly)
You should report your service each time you complete it. The reports are brief and getting into the habit of reporting regularly will ensure you receive the credit for all you do. Givepulse has a smartphone app that can make this regular reporting quite easy. Regular reporting helps both you and me communicate with your community partner and monitor everyone's progress across the course.

When to report your service activities (monthly)
You will be required to submit a Givepulse report monthly – dates are indicated on the syllabus schedule. Be sure to develop a system for tracking your time so that these monthly reports reflect all of your hard work. These regular reports help me communicate with your community partner and monitor your progress.

When to report your service activities (beginning and end of semester)
You are welcome to report your service activities in Givepulse as often as you like, particularly if regular reporting helps you keep track of your time and efforts. At the very minimum, I require that you submit two reports: one after your first engagement with the community partner and one at the end of the semester. The first report indicates to me that your progress has begun and confirms which community partner you will be working with this semester. The final report provides a summary of all your efforts with the partner, the outcomes for the community, and the impact on your own learning.

Background Checks and Serving with DC Public Schools
Children, people who are incarcerated, people with disabilities, and other community members are considered a "vulnerable population." It is quite common for our partner organizations to require a background check process before students are allowed to serve. DC Public Schools (DCPS) has a particularly thorough background check, which can require 2-3 weeks to complete, but continues to be valid for two years. If you intend to serve with DCPS or with a youth development program that uses their clearance process, please get the process started as soon as possible. Step-by-step instructions for the DCPS Clearance process are available here: http://go.gwu.edu/cesstudentguide

References

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