



Honey W. Nashman Center  
for Civic Engagement  
and Public Service

## Writing the Syllabus: Community Engaged Scholarship Courses

### FACULTY RESOURCE GUIDES

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. The syllabus is the primary way to communicate this good design.

Students who see themselves as having a role in facilitating their own learning will be more successful in a community engaged course. The syllabus should give them a clear understanding of the course learning goals and how the service activities, class discussions, and assignments have been designed to foster that learning.

What follows is an overview of relevant student learning theory as well as sample language to consider including in your own course syllabus.

### **Student Motivation to Achieve = Value + Expectancy**

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 (or self-efficacy).** 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).

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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 your expectations. A well-written syllabus can address these and other concerns.

## Addressing Student Perception of Value: Why Community-Engagement?

The community-engagement should be integrated into the course, not an add-on. That integration can be communicated by addressing it throughout the syllabus rather than as an addendum.

**The course description** should include a brief overview of the nature of 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, that it will be an exciting learning experience, and that the benefits for the community address a real need.

**A statement of Community Engaged Scholarship values** is highly recommended. Students should have awareness of what community engaged scholarship is and what its core principles are. It is also important to prepare students to engage with community partners in ways that are respectful. The Nashman Center provides a [\*Student Guide to Community Engaged Scholarship Courses\*](#) which accomplishes these goals. You are welcome to weave excerpts from the guide into your syllabus or provide the guide to students via Blackboard. It is also available to students through your GWServes course page, or you can provide this url: <http://go.gwu.edu/CESstudentguide>.

## Addressing Student Self-Efficacy: Clarity of Instructions and Expectations

Ballard and Elmore's Syllabus Construction Checklist (2009) emphasizes clear descriptions and expectations. The syllabus can promote student self-efficacy for the project by describing it clearly.

- What will students do? What will be their roles and responsibilities?
- Where (including directions)?
- With whom? (Individually or in student teams? Who is their community contact?)
- When and for how long? (Provide timelines. When should the service start and when should it be completed? Are minimum hours required?)
- Is the community engaged scholarship component an optional assignment or 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? (Be sure students have completed the online *Waiver and Release Agreement* available on your GWServes course page. You will be provided the submitted information, which includes students' emergency contact information).



**How will the community engaged scholarship be assessed?** It is a standard of practice that students should not be assigned a grade for the completion of service hours but for demonstrated learning. 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. Sharing the grading rubric with students in advance and discussing your expectations regarding the depth of reflection, is highly recommended.

In the case of direct service, students are often required to complete a certain number of service hours (20 is typical for a 15-week semester). This assignment is analogous to assigned readings - students do not receive a grade simply for being finished. Student learning from their service is assessed through course 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 required to complete a certain product for the community partner, such as a database, an architectural drawing, or a business plan. In these cases, student performance on the product, potentially including feedback from the community partner, is used for learning assessment and is factored into the course grade. Standards of quality and expectations regarding the scope of the finished work should be clear.

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 and students with severe 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 your 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.

## Community Partner Information

If you have already identified the community partner(s), either your syllabus or an addendum should describe how the partnership represents a mutually beneficial fit for the project. Students should also learn about the context of the project, including the organizational mission, the relevant history of the community it serves, and other details to prepare students to engage sensitively and effectively. Practical information should be included as well, such as the 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.

Much of this information can be found on the [community affiliates' pages on the GWServes platform](#). We strongly recommend using this platform to facilitate clear communication between instructors, students, and community partners.

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 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 communicate about the project professionally with the staff. Students should be instructed to identify themselves as GW students, including which course they are in, who their instructor is, and the nature of their assignment (service hours, project, etc.). Set a deadline for students to submit their proposed project that allows time for your review and approval before they begin their work. A project proposal worksheet can help students know what issues to address as they work with a community partner to plan the project.

## The GW Symposium on Community Engaged Scholarship

The GW Symposium on Community Engaged Scholarship is an event for students, faculty, and community partners, held at the end of every semester. It facilitates dialogue across academic departments, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies about GW's continued role in partnering for positive change and greater equity in our city. A free event, it includes a lunch speaker, student presentations of their community engagement projects, and discussion sessions on a variety of topics.

Many instructors incorporate Symposium participation into their course design, particularly those who assign "Showcase Presentations" as graded work. Showcase presentations provide a very brief (2-minute) visual-aid supported, overview of the students' community initiatives, followed by question/answer reflective conversations. Information to prepare your students to participate is available online (along with a link to rsvp for the event, which is required):

<https://serve.gwu.edu/symposium-community-engaged-scholarship>. Please contact Wendy Wagner, [wagnerw@gwu.edu](mailto:wagnerw@gwu.edu) for more information about including your course in this event.

Fall semester, the Symposium is scheduled for Monday, December 9th, noon-3:30pm spring semester it is Friday April 24<sup>th</sup> noon-3:30pm. It is important to include this date in your syllabus if participation will be an assignment or assignment-option. To describe Symposium participation in your syllabus, we invite you to insert the above paragraph in addition to more specific details such as the samples below.

- For this course, attending the Symposium to participate in these reflective conversations is a 10-point assignment. If you are unable to attend due to scheduling concerns, you may earn these points through a 2-page reflection paper. Please communicate with me in advance about an appropriate paper topic if you choose the latter option.
- For this course, the "Showcase Presentation" assignment (for 25-points) will be delivered at the Symposium. Keep in mind, to receive the full 25 points, you should participate in both your showcase presentation and in a concurrent discussion session of your choice. If your class schedule conflicts with the Symposium schedule (Monday, December 9th, noon-3:30pm/Friday April 24<sup>th</sup> noon-3:30pm), please let me know at the beginning of the semester and we will agree on an equivalent alternative assignment.



## Sample Syllabus Language

The following examples are provided as a starting point. Please edit and shift the language to fit your course.

**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 issues of the common good. 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. While this work will facilitate learning of my academic course objectives, it will also invite reflection on your beliefs about civic responsibility and your sense of purpose in the world.

The Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service provides support to our course. One important resource they provide is the *Student Handbook for Community Engaged Scholarship Courses*. It provides a step-by-step process to help you get started, a list of issues to be sure you communicate with your community partner about (e.g. how you are expected to dress, whether training is 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. The handbook is available at <http://go.gwu.edu/cesstudentguide> and on our GWServes course page.

**Reporting Your Service Activities.** 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 does.

Students will report their community-engagement/service activities using GWServes, an online platform: <http://go.gwu.edu/GWServes>. Using the same sign-in and password as other GW platforms, login and complete as much of your student profile as you like. You will then receive an invitation and link to join our course, via email. Once you are in your GWServes account, navigate to our course page to find the link to complete the Waiver and Release Agreement Form online.

To report service on GWServes, navigate to your community partner’s GWServes page and click the green “Add Impacts” button. If you can’t find your service location, click the “I can’t find it” button and fill in the information so your impact can be recorded. Be sure to share the hours with this course as well by clicking the box indicating our class before clicking the submit button.

Please report your service for this course as you complete it. This will help me communicate with your community partner and monitor students’ progress. While your graded reflection assignments in this course should be submitted on Blackboard with your other assignments, I do strongly recommend that you make brief notes in the “reflections” section each time you report service on GWServes. It will help your later reflections to have a reminder of what happened each time you served.



**Background Checks for Serving with DC Public Schools.** Children are considered a vulnerable population, and it is quite common for schools to require a background check for anyone providing services with the children or in the school building. The DCPS background checks can be cumbersome but should not be a barrier to GW students engaging with local schools. Please allow time to complete the required steps.

#### Step one: TB Testing

GW's Colonial Health Center can provide TB testing. If this is a requirement for service with your community partner, the Nashman Center will cover the costs of the standard test.

1. Complete the Nashman Center's Online TB Test Form: <http://go.gwu.edu/tbtest>
2. Show your GWorld ID at the Nashman Center front desk (837 22<sup>nd</sup> St.) to receive a voucher to use at Colonial Health.
3. Visit Colonial Health for your test. No appointment is necessary, walk-in appointments are available during the times below.
  - Tuesdays: No appointment necessary, walk in between: 9:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. and 2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
  - Wednesdays: No appointment necessary, walk in between: 9:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. and 2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
  - Fridays: no appointment necessary, walk in between: 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

#### Step two: Visit the DCPS Fingerprinting Fingerprinting Office (10th floor of 1200 First ST NE, Washington DC, 20002)

1. Complete the online clearance application (<https://octo.quickbase.com/db/bg37a864v>) **BEFORE** getting fingerprinted. If this application is not complete at the time of fingerprinting they will not proceed.
2. Bring a valid government issued ID, and printed copies of: A negative TB/PPD test result, ID (driver's license/passport), and your most updated physical and immunization records.
3. The office is open **Mon-Thurs: 8am to 5pm, and Friday: 8am to 3pm.** (Arrive at least 30 minutes before closing).

## References

- Ballard, S. M., & Elmore, B. (2009). A labor of love: constructing a service-learning syllabus. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 9(3), 70–76.
- Eccles, J. (1983). Expectancies, values, and academic behaviors. In J. T. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievement motives: Psychological and sociological approaches* (pp. 75-146). San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman.
- Kuh, G. (2009). *High-Impact educational practices, what they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

*This Nashman Faculty Resource Guide was authored by Dr. Wendy Wagner, Senior Program Manager for Community Engaged Scholarship. Please contact her for additional resources or a consultation: [wagnerw@gwu.edu](mailto:wagnerw@gwu.edu).*

