

# What is a service-learning agreement? A service-learning agreement is a written statement of the expectations for a service-learning experience held by the student, the faculty member, and the agency supervisor.

## What is its purpose?

Students and faculty who utilize community service placements as learning experiences are often confronted by the need to articulate in writing what that learning experience is all about. The student may feel this need to insure that he understands what both the faculty member and the agency supervisor in the community expect of him. Faculty may find a written agreement helpful in ascertaining the clarity of the student's learning objectives and the appropriateness of the placement for the desired learning. The community organization in which the student works, either as a volunteer or as a paid intern, may find a written agreement helpful in understanding what both student and faculty member expect from the placement and how agency personnel are expected to evaluate the student's work.

## When is a service-learning agreement useful?

A service-learning agreement is essential for an individual field experience which, like an independent research project, is designed by the student in consultation with a faculty sponsor. It is also useful for other community-based learning situations including volunteer experiences, cooperative education, work-study, and organized group internships. The agreement simply makes it easier for everyone involved—faculty, student, and agency supervisor, to have a common understanding of the roles and expectations of each person. Although the agreement is not a legal document, it enables all three parties to plan effectively for the service-learning experience. It thus reduces frustration, unmet expectations, and last minute changes of agenda.

## How does the student benefit from it?

The student may stand to gain more from a written agreement than either of the other two parties. Students involved in service-learning projects are often plagued by the absence of clear goals and the fear of a sudden change in the evaluation procedure. From the student's perspective, a written service-learning agreement:

- Helps him ask the right questions of agency staff, thereby obtaining data for designing the placement.
- Enables him to clarify his own expectations, both to the organization and to himself.
- Insures that evaluation will be conducted according to prearranged objectives and procedures, so there

will be little chance of a last minute change in the system of grading. This reduces student anxiety, uncertainty and "trying to figure out what the professor wants."

- Facilitates the efficient use of his energies by the agency, which must plan for the student's role.
- Enables him to present a more professional, assured demeanor to both agency and faculty.
- Insures that communication between supervisor and faculty sponsor will be smooth, on schedule, and without surprises.
- Provides data for letters of recommendations for applications to graduate school or employers. Information will be on file about his original plan and his final accomplishments.

## Why should an agency supervisor want to bother with it?

A service-learning agreement:

- Allows the agency to clarify in writing its expectations of the student prior to making a commitment to place him—to outline job responsibilities, hours per week, and methods of evaluation.
- Cuts down on unexpected, last minute demands for evaluation data. There will be no sudden phone calls from a strange professor saying that he expects a 10-page written evaluation of the student's performance, when the supervisor expected to write half a page.
- Tells the agency supervisor that the field experience has an academic component and outlines the academic requirements.
- Provides prearranged objectives and procedures for evaluation. This results in the systematic collection of data about the quality of the student's work that can be used in letters of recommendation for the student if he requests them.
- Defines the volunteer's responsibilities, before he enters the agency, so that the supervisor can place him efficiently in a task suited to student manpower.
- Lets the agency know of any planned academic work, such as papers and reports, that might be useful to the organization.

## Why would the faculty find this agreement useful?

A service-learning agreement:

- Requires that a student be independently motivated to define his academic goals and to achieve them through experiential learning, thereby reducing the amount of time needed for counseling.

# A SAMPLE SERVICE-LEARNING AGREEMENT

**Name of Student:** Jane Henderson

**Address:** 3456 Ronald Hall    **Phone:** 738-9640

**Major:** Social Work

**Student's Position:** Intake Aide

**Name of Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Sarah Peterson

**Address:** Thompson Hall    **Phone:** 577-2020

**Office Hours:** Mon., Wed., Fri., 1:00-4:00 pm

**Dates of Service-Learning:** September 1-December 15

To Be Filled In By Sponsoring Faculty Member

**1. What are the learning objectives for the student? At the completion of the service-learning placement, the student will be able to demonstrate:**

- a. Professional interviewing techniques
- b. Understanding of and familiarity with the purpose and use of the agency's interviewing forms.
- c. Knowledge of public and private agencies to which clients should be referred

**2. What will constitute evidence that these learning objectives have been met?**

- a. Reports (monthly and final) from the supervisor
- b. A weekly log kept by the student
- c. Final term paper written by the student

**3. What academic work will the student complete?**

- a. Student will attend all classes of Social Work 103
- b. Student will complete all class assignments

**4. What factors will be considered in the student's final grade?**

Student will be graded on completed class assignments, reports from his agency supervisor, and a one-hour oral examination by his professor to evaluate his ability to integrate field experience with classroom learning.

**Name of Agency:** County Department of Social Services

**Supervisor:** Melvin Longworth

**Title:** Senior Intake Clerk

**Address:** Town Hall

**Hours Per Week:** Three

To Be Filled In By Agency Staff Member

**1. What is the purpose of the agency and whom does it serve?**

To distribute and administer available social benefits to low-income residents and refer them to other agencies as needed.

**2. What orientation/training will you provide the student?**

Student will be given a three-hour orientation session on agency procedures and methods for dealing with client problems.

**3. What will the student be expected to do at the agency? List the tasks.**

- a. Conduct routine intake interviews with applicants
- b. Fill out required agency forms
- c. Answer clients' inquiries and refer as appropriate

**4. Who will supervise the student? How often? What will be the procedure?**

Student will be closely supervised by Senior Intake Clerk for the first three work sessions; after which there will be a half hour review session each week.

**5. How will the agency evaluate the student? Who will prepare the evaluation? May the student have a copy?**

Student will be evaluated by Senior Intake Clerk who will prepare a monthly report on student performance and a final report following an oral evaluation meeting. All reports will be submitted to the faculty sponsor and the student.

- Provides objective, “educational” criteria for deciding whether or not to sponsor a student in a service-learning placement.

- Outlines the respective evaluation roles of faculty and agency staff prior to the student’s service.

- Provides a written statement of the student’s plans and performance which can be used in future letters of recommendation.

- Records the amount of time the faculty member spends in field experience education, which is often of interest to college administrators.

- Serves as a basis for suggesting future placements.

### **How do you draw up a service-learning agreement?**

The process of drawing up a service-learning agreement includes the following steps, but not necessarily in the order given below.

1. The student finds a placement related to his academic field of interest. Then he contacts the agency by phone, introduces himself, finds out about current openings, and expresses an interest in working for the agency in a position for which he will receive academic credit. He makes an appointment for an interview with a staff member of the agency to discuss the details of the service part of the service-learning agreement.

2. The student identifies a faculty member who has the same academic interests and might be interested in sponsoring the field experience. He approaches the faculty member with information tentatively gained from the phone call to the agency. If the faculty member agrees to sponsor the student, the student arranges a time (after the visit to the agency) when they can get together and draw up the components of the learning part of the agreement. At this meeting the faculty member may indicate certain parameters for the assignment or emphasize certain learning objectives.

3. The student visits the community agency. Details of what the student will be doing, the time commitment required, how long the experiences will last, and the nature of the supervision are drafted. The student might also inquire about the things he will *not* be doing—to get a clearer idea of mutual expectations.

4. The student returns to campus and meets with the faculty sponsor to work out the learning objectives of the field experience. For example, “At the conclusion of the service-learning experience, the student will be able to (a) list the organizations providing services to the visually handicapped, (b) know the eligibility requirements of each, and (c) discuss the theoretical basis for providing supportive services to the handicapped.” (For further information about learning objectives see NSVP’s *Training Manual*, Robert Mager’s *Writing*

*Instructional Objectives*, and Benjamin S. Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Education Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*.)

Student and faculty sponsor also agree on required written assignments (reading lists, reaction reports, logs) and the dates they are due.

5. The student finalizes the details of the agreement and gives a copy to all parties involved—himself, the faculty member, and the agency supervisor.

### **Then what happens?**

The agreement then becomes a guideline for the student’s field experience. It reminds him of the dates when assignments are due, how and when evaluations of his work are to be completed, and when he is expected to be at the agency. It gives him a basis for negotiating an amendment if he feels that the tasks he is actually performing are not conducive to the learning he expected. It also provides him with criteria against which to measure his own progress on a weekly or monthly basis.

### **Can you use these agreements for group placements?**

Although we have talked about the agreement in terms of individual, student-initiated placements, there is no reason why a faculty member working with a group of students cannot use the same procedure. The faculty member may prescribe both the academic requirements and the service placements for groups. A written agreement can help a group of students ask the right questions about their placement in order to identify differences in their expectations and those of the agency staff before those differences become bones of contention.

### **How do you evaluate a field experience?**

Some faculty prefer an on-site visit to evaluate the student’s field work. Others prefer a brief meeting (in person or over the phone) with the agency supervisor. Still others suggest a three-way meeting including the faculty member, the student, and the agency supervisor. Another option is the use of a standard rating form that asks about the contributions the student has made to the agency and the student’s personal growth. Another possibility is a written, open-ended evaluation of the student’s performance by the agency supervisor. Often the faculty sponsor combines the evaluation of the student’s field experience with an evaluation of his or her academic work. In this way the final grade reflects both the quality of the student’s service in the community and his ability to integrate and interpret that experience within an academic context.