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# Community Service-Learning in Canadian Higher Education

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Vancouver, 2015



a place of mind

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## Main messages

Curricular community service-learning (CSL) integrates learning through service in the community with intentional course-based learning activities. While CSL programs have been part of higher education in the US since the early 1970s, most of the growth in Canadian programs has taken place since the 1990s. Like the US, CSL programs in Canada have diverse aims and approaches. They tend to include a mix of experiential education, action research, critical theory, progressive education, adult education, social justice education, constructivism, community-based research, multicultural education, and undergraduate research.

*How can service learning enhance student engagement and outcomes?* The literature discusses elements to consider in designing CSL activities, including the quantity and quality of reflective activities, duration and intensity of service, diversity of service, meaningful integration of classroom and community learning, involvement of community partners in designing student activities/projects, and preparation of students for these projects. But importantly, CSL design is related to aims of programs, which vary from “technical” goals to more “transformative” goals. Therefore, clarity about aims as well as about differences in the learning theories underpinning particular approaches to CSL is important. Further, developing reciprocal relationships between university and community means responding to community priorities too.

*How does CSL contribute to new ways of learning?* Writers tend to agree that CSL initiatives can promote critical thinking and civic responsibility if they are carefully organized, have clarity of purpose, are relevant to students’ professional futures, address the emotional dimensions of students’ learning, and provide guided reflection. The complexity of university-community partnerships must also be acknowledged. Innovative approaches discussed in studies include establishing interdisciplinary student teams, using art and poetry to promote learning, promoting dialogical relationships with community, and adopting asset-based approaches in community.

*What are promising practices to addressing student diversity through CSL?* Existing literature suggests that CSL instructors need to recognize student diversity, particularly the positions of students in relation to community members. Acknowledging diversity can help educators engage students from various backgrounds and circulate healthy, safe dialogues that bridge classroom theory with CSL praxis.

*What institutional structures and supports are necessary for CSL to flourish?* CSL requires visionary leadership at all levels, resources, and coordination. It is important for those involved to consider how organizational structures impact the ability of service learning to meet educational goals; and how the work of CSL is to be organized and implemented.

Our review of the literature suggests more Canadian research on CSL in higher education is needed to inform the design of CSL programs and activities.

## **Executive summary**

### **Background**

This report focuses on community service-learning as a response to the question, “What new ways of learning in higher education (HE) will Canadians need to thrive in an evolving society and labour market?” The Association of American Colleges and Universities describes curricular service learning as a “high-impact” educational practice. Service learning is a method in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, are integrated into students’ academic curriculum, and enhance classroom learning with learning in the community.

Although CSL has been around in the US since the early 1970s, the service learning course had become the dominant form by the early 1990. In the past fifteen years, there has been significant growth of CSL within Canadian universities and colleges. But programs tend to be small in terms of staffing, resources, and student numbers. This report helps address the need for information to guide Canadian CSL programs in higher education as well as identifying gaps in the research literature.

Conceptual influences on service learning include the educational theories of John Dewey, David Kolb and Paulo Freire. But service learning is not a coherent pedagogical strategy; rather, it is an amalgam of experiential education, action research, critical theory, progressive education, adult education, social justice education, constructivism, community-based research, multicultural education and undergraduate research (Butin, 2006). Further, literature on the role, benefits, structures, intentions, and impacts of service learning experiences in higher education is in its infancy compared with other learning-related literature.

### **Guiding questions and implications**

Our review of the CSL literature is organized around the following four questions:

- A. How can service learning be delivered in universities and colleges to enhance student engagement and outcomes?
- B. How does CSL contribute to new ways of fostering greater knowledge and competency in critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, civic responsibility, and understanding of diversity?
- C. What are promising practices to ensure access to and/or mobility within Canadian education for a diverse student body including persons with disabilities, adult learners, international students and immigrants? And finally,
- D. What institutional structures and supports are necessary for CSL to flourish?

This report is directed towards service learning participants (instructors, students, community partners), higher education and community leaders, and policy-makers.

## **Approach**

A keyword search of the entire Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database identified 4,030 references that contained a descriptor “service learning.” Most of these studies were published in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, *Journal of Experiential Education*, and *Teaching Sociology*. The five countries with the highest number of items related to service learning included (in order) the US, UK, Canada, Australia and South Africa.

Our selection of items from databases was based on questions A to D above. During the initial phases, two research assistants independently reviewed and reorganized the research team’s existing collection of CSL literature and undertook a further comprehensive literature search. All members of the research team were involved during the second phase of literature review, which consisted of title, keyword and abstract review. Items identified as highly relevant by multiple team members were then assessed in greater depth by the three research assistants who completed summary templates for these items. The summaries helped identify items to be read by multiple team members for the final stage of this knowledge synthesis.

## **Results**

**A. The Delivery and Outcomes of Service Learning:** The US National Service Learning Cooperative identified elements in effective CSL that include: the alignment of service learning programs with curriculum and academic program goals; allowing students to choose which issues to address in their SL projects; community input into the desired elements and goals of service projects; and opportunities for student reflection.

Other characteristics of effective service learning include the meaningful integration of classroom and community learning; projects that match the skill levels of students; preparation of students for community engagement; community partner involvement in planning, design and delivery of activities; initiatives that blur lines between teaching, research, and service; more deliberate power sharing at each step of the collaboration with community; and the development of ongoing community partnerships with strong relationships.

Some CSL activities aim to promote transformative learning for students while others are more pragmatically focused. However, most writers agree that the benefits for students include: reflective and collaborative learning; greater awareness of the links between theory and practice; development of multicultural competencies; commitment to social justice; increased commitment to community engagement; development of professional identity; learning about self in relation to others; and increased self-confidence regarding content knowledge.

**B. The Contribution of CSL to New Ways of Learning:** There was a general consensus that CSL can promote critical thinking and civic responsibility if they are carefully organized, have clarity of purpose, are relevant to students’ professional futures, address the emotional dimensions of students’ learning, and provide opportunities for ongoing student reflections,

guided by faculty who understand students' levels of understanding about social problems. Activities where students engage with unfamiliar communities are strongly associated with developing deeper understandings about diversity and are of particular interest in professional education. How CSL can lead to students' increased civic mindedness is a recurring theme in CSL studies.

**C. Addressing Student Diversity Through CSL:** The review of literature revealed that some research has focused on the effects of CSL on diverse student populations from varying social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Writers suggest there is a need to design a CSL framework that empowers diverse communities; is informed by critical pedagogy; is situated in learning theory; and promotes a focus on the assets of community members. Most writers also agree that there is a need to address the positionality of students in relation to the communities in which they are working. For example, white middle-class university students "serving" in racialized communities are positioned differently than "first generation" racialized students. The literature suggests that acknowledging difference helps educators engage students from various backgrounds and create healthy, safe dialogues that extend classroom theory to CSL praxis.

#### **D. Institutional Structures and Supports Required for CSL**

A number of authors discuss the kind of institutional supports necessary for successful CSL and community-university engagement more generally. Recommendations include: academic leaders engaging in strategic planning around service learning; developing a centralized office to address the needs of different participants; increasing budget commitments to programs; ensuring service learning is guided by academic leadership; enlisting faculty or administrative champions; creating and utilizing advisory boards; promoting the program both internally and externally; and building assessment instruments to evaluate programs.

**Additional resources:** Developing this report has yielded several databases related to each of our focal questions, housed in both Zotero and Endnote. These have been merged into an annotated bibliography which we plan to make available on the UBC Centre for Community-Engaged Learning website.

#### **Gaps and further research**

Our review suggests the need for research that uses mixed-methods; is longitudinal; addresses the structures and supports are needed for CSL programs to flourish; addresses differences related to different CSL models; focuses on all participants; documents students' actual behaviours; and explores the CSL experiences of diverse groups of students.