

**Social Change or Band-Aid?  
Reflecting on Our Assumptions About Service Learning**

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A critical part of service learning is reflection, and in the spirit of reflection, this presentation will ask participants to examine their own service learning classes, their institutions' programs, and the wider communities we inhabit. A primary goal of the session is to illuminate the assumptions that underlie our reasons for practicing service learning. By reflecting on the assumptions, participants will be better equipped to sustain and strengthen their service learning programs.

**Session details and format:**

This session will be a forum, a collaborative and substantive discussion of the issues that underlie the foundation of service learning and community-based courses.

The general plan for the format is to work from a micro level (an individual course and one student's experience) to a macro level (discussions of national issues and the society at large). A scenario of a student service project will be used to facilitate the discussion of the various levels.

Scenario: As a requirement in his research writing class, a course focusing on the subject of public education, Juan's service learning project takes place at Ethos, a community non-profit organization providing music instruction for low-income youth, primarily for those attending schools with no arts funding.

Discussion levels:

Level One: What might the student get from the experience, positive and/or negative?

Level Two: What might the student's college get out of the project, positive and/or negative?

Level Three: What might the local community get out of the project, positive and/or negative?

Level Four: What might the society as a whole or the nation get out of the project, positive and/or negative?

**Motivations/Foundations for the session:**

On one level, the presenters believe in the importance of programmatic self-reflection. If a program, especially a service learning program, is to remain vital and healthy, that program must continue to reflect on its core mission, the reasons its practitioners support it, the motivations of the many stakeholders, and the implications of the program's work. In this spirit of reflection, what do our detractors say about the work we do? Which, if any, of their criticisms are valid? What do we need to be careful about? The presenters hope that, on this level, session participants will at least begin this important reflection process and that it will serve to ultimately strengthen participants' programs.

On another level, the presenters feel that this is a crucial time for practitioners of service learning to reflect on what we do in a broader context. It's an important time for at least a couple of reasons. One, service learning as a "movement" has begun to grow up in the last few years. More schools than ever are now boasting service learning programs, more students than ever are being exposed to service learning (many of whom are required to participate), and more foundation and federal dollars are available to support service learning. Two, service learning (and volunteerism in general) is receiving strong support from a conservative federal administration that has a profoundly different understanding of the issues of social justice that

motivate many service learning practitioners and that advocates for a smaller government providing fewer services. How do we see service learning fitting into our larger political landscape? *Do* we see service learning fitting into the larger political picture? How do we engage service learning students on this level of discourse, and what do they think about the nature of social change from this perspective? The presenters hope that this forum will provide a dialogue on these and other questions related to how service learning and civic engagement fit into this larger framework.