

What Is Meant by Establishing Learning Objectives?

Learning objectives establish purpose and are the critical first step from which every other element of the service-learning process will flow. Learning objectives state what skills and knowledge participants aim to acquire through service. Looking back after service, learning objectives provide the basis for understanding what was learned and are the benchmark for analyzing how attitudes and assumptions have changed. Learning objectives can be derived from many sources, including the curriculum of an academic institution.

Establishing learning objectives does not mean that we may no longer celebrate and explore those unexpected, unpredictable “teachable moments” that happen along the way. Learning objectives allow us to determine if we have achieved what we set out to achieve, help us evaluate our process and let us know if we have been effective in responding to the needs of our participants. By establishing learning objectives, participants walk away with expanded knowledge and the skills necessary for them to make a positive difference.

Every YMCA program is designed to help participants build specific skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. By integrating service-learning into any YMCA program, you can help participants develop those program-specific learning objectives while also engaging them in helping others and developing civic awareness.

Learning objectives differ from goals in that goals identify the overall purpose for service while learning objectives identify the specific increase in skills and knowledge of the participant. For example, a health and fitness director could use a fundraising exercise-a-thon to help fund research to cure breast cancer. That is a goal. Participants would learn exercise principles as they would in a regular Y class, but they would also learn about breast cancer and develop fundraising skills. Those are the learning objectives for this project. When setting goals and learning objectives, the possibilities are endless—service-learning can be used to enhance the pre-existing goals of any and every YMCA program. The trick is to ask, What are this program’s goals? How could a service-learning project reinforce those goals? What else could service-learning help our participants in this program learn?

What Is Meaningful Service?

Meaningful service is the action in the service-learning process. It must be connected to the learning objectives. Service is generally considered meaningful if it meets a need that the service beneficiaries believe is important or valuable. In addition, the service is considered meaningful if it allows the participant to not



only use existing skills but to expand their knowledge and talents. The service may be either community service or YMCA service.

The list of possible service projects is infinite. It could include community gardens, mural painting at the YMCA, hosting brown-bag healthy lifestyle lunches, tutoring, water testing, chores for the home-bound, beautification projects, storm drain labeling, tree planting, performing arts in nursing homes, recycling—the sky is the limit! Anything goes as long as it meets a real need and is significant to the participants involved.

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What Is Structured Reflection?

Reflection is the process of engaging the participant's critical thinking skills to prepare for and learn from the service activity. Reflection is an essential component of effective service-learning, yet it is often neglected. Many feel that it is the most important step in the process. It provides a time to capture valuable knowledge and integrate it into the participant's thinking.

Reflection is important because service-learning often introduces the participant to new relationships, experiences, questions and feelings. There is no way of knowing how the participants are reacting to these new experiences or what they are learning from them unless there is an opportunity to share their thoughts; that which is not addressed may not be understood.

Reflection provides the coordinator with an opportunity to check on how the group is doing on the established learning objectives and to evaluate the project. Participants gain knowledge and skills as they actively engage in preparing for and looking back at what has been accomplished. This process extends the experience of giving from a one-sided venture to true sharing in which the participant gets as much as the service beneficiary.

By adding reflection, we can create deeper, longer-lasting positive outcomes for participants. And the practice of reflection particularly fits for the YMCA. Service-learning is a great way to put YMCA values into action, and reflection is an excellent means of considering how our values exist in our lives.

If we exclude reflection from the service experience, we run the risk of reinforcing preconceived notions that the participants may bring to the experience. Take the example of the group of young people who took part in a service project serving homeless people at a soup kitchen. The group spent the day serving meals without the opportunity to reflect on who they were serving, the impact of their service, the role of the host facility or the significance of the larger social issue. Predictably, when questioned about their experience, many of the participants reported that their views on homeless people, such as "they are dirty," "they are different" and "they should find jobs," had not changed.

By comparison, participants who are given the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their work before, during and after their service experience have a much greater chance of gaining significant learning. The contrast is evident when you consider our second example, a group of participants who spent the day in recreational activities with physically disabled individuals. The project facilitator prepared the group by beginning the day with a discussion on the challenges faced by the population of people with whom the group would be working. Prior to the service project, she had the participants explore the challenges faced by the physically disabled by having them try to accomplish tasks while being restricted in their ability to see, speak or move. After the service project, participants were



asked to write down their thoughts regarding what had surprised them during the day.

In contrast to the group who served at the soup kitchen, many in the latter group were able to express a new understanding of what they shared in common with the people whom they had served.

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Setting the Pace

When evaluating possible projects, it's wise to start simple, build upon your success and pace your group with a variety of different types of projects. You can categorize projects as “crawl,” “walk” or “run”—a concept adapted from the YMCA Earth Service Corps program. Crawl projects are great for a group that will be together only for a short while or for a new group. Walk and run projects involve more planning and coordination and should be done when your group is ready for a bigger challenge or a long-term project.

Crawl projects

Crawl projects are projects that can be done quickly and easily and show immediate results. They can be done in one day and require some planning and organization, but not much. Basically, people should be able to easily show up and participate in a crawl project and be able to contribute. Crawl projects are excellent motivators and are a great way to recruit new participants. The most common type of crawl project is the cleanup of a park, school grounds, a beach, etc. Cleanups can involve a large group of people and definitely leave a visible impact on an area. Crawl projects should be fun and should really make folks feel like they've made a difference.

Walk projects

Walk projects are more complex but still have clear, visible outcomes. Walk projects might take a few days to actually complete and require more leadership, planning and evaluation. These projects tend to require more involvement on the part of a group and that a larger number of participants take on leadership roles. Examples of successful walk projects include organizing a safety presentation for an elementary school, planning a canned-food drive and competition, or working with local artists to create park benches with mosaics on them.

Run projects

Starting a program that refurbishes used bicycles and donates them to low-income neighbors in combination with bike safety lessons is a run project. These projects involve a great deal of organization, collaboration, follow-up and evaluation along the way so that people can see progress. Run projects might take weeks to organize and often involve a long-term commitment. It's important to remember that run projects will take a lot of a group's energy, time and resources. The outcome you are trying to reach is important but remember to focus on the process: How well are you working together as a group? Does everyone have a role and a way to contribute? Is the goal clear? These are the types of questions you'll need to ask as you take on a run project.

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Some Starter Reflection Questions

One thing that is important to remember is that reflection should happen throughout the service-learning experience. Here are some starter reflection questions.

- **PRE-PROJECT REFLECTION.** What are we going to do? Why? Are we prepared? Does everyone know what is expected of them? Are we all on the same page? What ideas do I have about the community or group with which I will be working?
- **MID-PROJECT REFLECTION.** Are we still learning and growing? Are we doing what we originally set out to do? If not, is that okay? What are some of the frustrations of this project? Can we do anything about them?
- **POST-PROJECT REFLECTION.** What did we learn? Who did we help? Did it meet their needs? Could we do it better next time? Are there other things that we can do now to address the need? How do we view our community differently because of our involvement in this experience? Are our ideas different from the ones we had before the experience?

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40 Ways to Reflect

Reflection on service can happen in many different ways. Select methods that fit your particular learning and development objectives, the age and skills of your group, and the available time and resources.

1. Complete guided worksheets on the project.
2. Create a bulletin board display.
3. Create a fundraising campaign to provide financial support that builds on the service.
4. Create a journal.
5. Create a scrapbook.
6. Create a video or slide show.
7. Create a Web site on the topic.
8. Create an individual or group portfolio.
9. Create briefing papers for policy makers.
10. Create collages representing the experience or the issue.
11. Create drawings, paintings or sculptures.
12. Develop and present a drama, puppet show, dance or music concert.
13. Do a conference or workshop presentation.
14. Do public speaking about the project.
15. Role-play.
16. Draw editorial cartoons or comic strips.
17. Give oral reports to the class or group.
18. Have a "talk show" about the service project or the social issues involved.
19. Hold class or group discussions.
20. Host discussions with community members or experts.
21. Lead a school assembly.
22. Lead a worship service (for congregation-based groups).
23. Participate in a group simulation experience.
24. Plan a training session for other youth.
25. Plan the next activity the group or class will do together on the same topic.
26. Prepare booklets on related topics to be used to teach others.
27. Read and discuss children's books on the service topic or social issue.
28. Read articles or chapters on the social, religious, ethical, historical or political issues at stake in the project.
29. Research social issues related to the project.
30. Study sacred writings, literature or historical material related to the project.
31. Teach material to younger children.
32. Testify before a decision-making or policy-setting group.
33. Write a group letter to families suggesting how they can get involved together.
34. Write a letter to a parent or friend about the experience.
35. Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper.
36. Write about a specific topic.
37. Write an essay or report about the needs.
38. Write and illustrate storybooks to read to younger children.
39. Write articles for a local or organizational newsletter or newspaper.
40. Write poetry about the experience.

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Ways to Identify a Project

Many types of service-learning projects can be created with information gathered from the community through resource mapping. Consider projects that:

- Identify and close resource gaps within a community
- Create potential linkages among groups or individuals within a community
- Discover previously unknown resources and opportunities
- Establish partnerships for making social or economic change within a community

The process of exploring the community has most likely uncovered some areas in the community that need increased resources. The group has already worked to identify resources that are available in the community. One way to create a service-learning project is to match those resource gaps with the resources available in the community. Remember that the resource mapping process does not have to end with one service-learning project. Identify multiple types of projects that meet different learning objectives and provide variety to the participants.

Tips for Successful Projects

- Connect the project and the learning objectives. Work on both at the same time, refining the ideas as you go along.
- Make sure the project is meaningful to the community. Whenever possible, involve service beneficiaries in the selection, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the project.
- Involve participants in the leadership, selection, and planning of the project.
- Provide good training and orientation before the project takes place.
- Empower the participants to lead the project and to work as closely as possible with service beneficiaries and community collaborators.
- Engage and stretch the skills and talents of the participants.
- Follow all of your YMCA's policies and all laws related to your service-learning activities.
- Provide opportunities to reflect throughout the experience.

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Making Connections in the Community

Building stronger community-based relationships is all about making connections. Sometimes that is a lot easier said than done. There are several factors to think of when you are contemplating beginning a relationship with another organization, whether it is a school or a shelter or a senior center.

It is one thing to just cold call, but just think, what if someone in your YMCA or association already has a relationship with someone in that organization? That means a lot less work for you! Granted, the person they know may not be in the department that you need, but that contact can direct you to the person you need. An added advantage is that you often get a warmer welcome when you tell the person you're calling that someone else in their own organization suggested that you call.

If you find that there is a particular organization that you would like to work with and no one has a connection, it's time for the dreaded cold call. It's much easier if you are prepared, though. Research is imperative. Do an Internet search and find out as much out about the organization as possible. Find the name of the person that may be in charge of programming or of volunteers. This way when you call you will be able to ask for someone rather than just the person that is in charge of community service or volunteers. If all else fails and you only have the phone number of the organization, you can, of course, ask the person answering the phone if they have someone in charge of community service or volunteers.

The most important thing when you make phone calls to organizations that you don't know is to introduce yourself and explain why you are calling and where you are calling from. It's also important to prepare for your call. Make notes ahead of time about what you want to say and what you want to learn.

Be very gracious to the person answering the phone. Turning the person who answers the phone into an ally can make the difference in whether you get connected to voice mail, the person you're trying to reach or an assistant. If you do end up talking to an assistant, remember to turn that person into an ally too. State your case, make it compelling, be polite and respectful and you are far more likely to get to talk to the person you want to talk to. Remember, too, that assistants often execute projects once their bosses approve them; this is another good reason to make sure you engage the assistant in your idea. Finally, be sure to let your new contact know that you aren't just asking, but offering; it is important to show them how valuable the YMCA could be to their organization and participants.



Here are some tips for creating successful service-learning partnerships, adapted from the National Youth Leadership Council:

- **BE PREPARED.** When initially approaching agencies, your preparation, professionalism and genuineness will be rewarded by a positive image of your program and a greater opportunity for success.
- **BE FLEXIBLE.** Remember to work around the partner's schedule and be respectful of their time constraints.
- **EDUCATE YOUR PARTNER.** Provide as much information as possible to your collaborators. You can even design a training for them so that they will understand how best to work with your participants.
- **FIND A CHAMPION.** Try to determine who would be the best initial contact person from your YMCA, such as a key volunteer, your executive or CEO, other senior leaders or even an advisory board made up of a number of people.
- **IDENTIFY KEY NEEDS.** Ask about the greatest needs at the collaborating organization. Don't let others prematurely limit the roles of your participants. People will appreciate your general interest in their agency and be surprised by what you can do with them.
- **RECIPROCITY.** One longtime service-learning coordinator says that when approaching an agency for the first time, he always confronts the same dilemma: What can I legitimately ask of this agency? The goal should be that both parties positively stretch the value of the partnership through strong communication and planning. Strong relationships are built over time and do not just happen.
- **INCLUDE ALL STAKEHOLDERS.** When setting up relationships, remember that there are multiple parties involved. Consider the needs of the participants, the service beneficiaries and the community collaborators. Have the views and needs of each been considered in the program design?
- **SET SERVICE PARAMETERS.** Although all sites will share some similar concerns about when and where to place participants, communities will differ in the roles they are willing to give participants. It is important that each program develop defensible parameters for their choices and occasionally re-evaluate those standards.
- **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.** Any good collaboration takes the time to establish clear roles and responsibilities for each partner. In service-learning initiatives, it is key to establish who is responsible for each of the many tasks, such as recruiting, orientation, training, transportation, supervision, evaluation, recognition, publicity, funding and scheduling meetings.

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