What's Your Why?

Youth Service-Learning Project Toolkit

Purpose of this Toolkit

Volunteer Iowa and its youth volunteers have created this toolkit to help young people discover their potential to create change through designing and implementing service-learning projects. This toolkit will walk youth, school, and community partners through the service-learning process of investigating a need, planning a service project and building partnerships, implementing a service project through diverse ways, reflecting and assessing the experience, and sharing the experience with others.

Benefits of Service-Learning

For Schools

- Service-learning increases youth participation in-class and boosts attendance rates.
- Engages 21st century skills and is a form of social-emotional learning.
- Evidence shows academic gains in classes that participate in service-learning, including improvement on achievement test scores.
- Youth are 19% more likely to graduate from college than those who did not do service-learning

For Youth

- Service-learning provides career experience and real-world application of learning
- Service-learning allows youth to explore interests and skills, helping to enhance one's personal identity
- Service-learning creates a community reflective of youth's interest.
- Volunteers are 23% more likely to be hired than those who do not volunteer

For Communities

- Service-learning decreases incidences of negative social behaviors.
- Youth are more likely to engage with their community after a service-learning project.
- Those who engage in service-learning are more likely to vote and/or run for office than their counterparts.
- Nonprofits receive access to new skills and capabilities beyond their organization

Definitions

Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs that are clearly related to the academic objectives of a course and/or major field of study.

Youth Service occurs when young people are actively engaged in opportunities to improve their community. Students assist organizations through volunteer work.
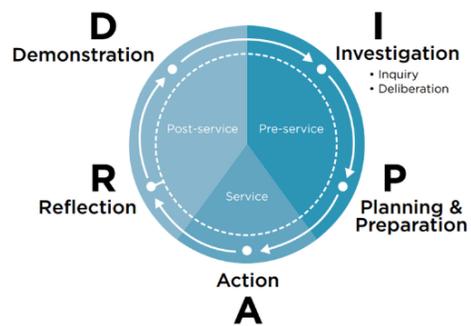
This toolkit walks students through a **service-learning experience.**

Process for Creating a Service-Learning Project

The five-step process for creating a project is known as IPARD.

It stands for:

1. Investigate
2. Plan
3. Act
4. Reflect
5. Demonstrate

This toolkit will breakdown each step of this process and provide tips for how to engage in the IPARD process successfully.

Step 1

Investigate a local, statewide, national, or global issue to address. If you need help identifying a need, a great resource is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Consider how these goals are relevant to where you live.

Educators can use learning frameworks to guide investigation. A science class could focus on environmental issues. A history class could focus on voting rights.

Tips for Investigating Needs

1. **Research:** Define your community and research data and news stories about the area. The US Census is a great resource to start building a community profile which will help you identify needs.

2. **Community Map:** Understanding what exists in your community and what doesn't will benefit you in identifying needs. Are there any nonprofits locally? Are there organizations requesting volunteers? Are there any municipalities who could benefit from service projects? Remember that your relevant entities in your community are

not limited to non-profits. Businesses and organizations with expertise in certain areas may be well-versed specific issues relevant to their work. For example, a cafe may know how much plastic is consumed in their business. A library may know how many individuals lack internet access. Creating a full picture of your community will also help later, when you identify potential partners for developing your plan to address the need.

3. **Surveys, Focus Groups, & Interviews:** Once you define your community, one way to discover needs is simply to ask. Conduct surveys, interviews, focus groups, etc. to hear directly from individuals on what is impacting them.

Consider What's Your Why

After investigating a need and identifying the issue you would like your service project to address, it's time to start brainstorming projects to address the need. You should connect with potential partners you identified in your community map to discover how you can support their work.

It's now important to take a pause and reflect on what you would like to gain from your service project experience. Consider what you love to do, such as painting, sports, comedy, music, etc. and consider if you would like to gain professional experience in a personal interest of yours. Consider your unique set of skills and knowledge and what it may bring to a service project. Unique service projects can stem from identifying your "why." For example, an individual who loves baking could sell goods at the local farmers market and donate sales to a cause. An individual who loves photography may create a blog with animal profiles for a local pet adoption shelter

For educators, consider what learning outcomes you would like youth to achieve. You can require specific tasks be apart of the action strategy to ensure learning objectives are met. A language class could focus on a project that requires writing in the action item. A math class could require data analysis.

Before deciding on an action strategy, also consider if it's currently being done, or has been done recently, and how effective it was. Avoid duplicative work to ensure your action is meaningful.

Step 2

Plan your service project to address your need and implement your action strategy. Planning may take up a majority of your service project. It's best to work backwards from your goal.

Consider:

- What resources do I need?
- How will I obtain resources I need? Donations? Fundraising?

- Will I need volunteers to assist with my project? How will I recruit them?
- Are there any partnerships with organizations I could form to help in implementing this day or obtaining resources?
- Will I need an event space for my project? Do I need approval to use that space?
- Do I need to promote my service project?

It is also important to develop a timeline for yourself to know when you need to meet certain goals throughout the project. For example, you may need to create pitch to garner investments for your project if you need funds to purchase resources. One step must be completed before you can move on to the next.

Utilize community partners you identified in your community map to provide feedback on your project, resources, volunteers, etc. Partners may serve as mentors to you and are a valuable connection as well as increase the likelihood of success for your project.

Step 3

It is now time to act. This is when you implement your service-learning project. This step is the execution of your plan. It may be completed in short or long-time span, with several tasks or a few. Discover the diverse ways you may engage in service below.

Direct service occurs when you have face-to-face interaction with who or what is being served.

Examples include:

- Providing a meal at a shelter
- Walking a dog
- Offering tech support to seniors at a nursing home
- Reading to children

Indirect service is not in the presence of who or what you are impacting.

Examples include:

- Stocking shelves at a pantry
- Running a nonprofit's social media
- Fundraising for a nonprofit
- Donating old clothes to a thrift store

Awareness educates others about a cause. Share information and teach others about an issue you are passionate about.

Examples include:

- Advocating for a change in school policy
- Designing flyers promoting mental wellness
- Writing a letter to the editor on an issue

Find volunteer opportunities near you on Volunteer Iowa's statewide database.

Step 4

The fourth step of your service project should occur throughout the process. Reflection should be incorporated from beginning to end.

At the start of your service project, ask yourself what you hope to learn, discover, create. Throughout the process, reassess your answer to those questions. What do you like doing? What don't you like?

After implementing your service project, ask what was a success? What wasn't? What would you do differently? What do you now know that you didn't at the start of the process?

Consider keeping a diary, record videos of your experience, take a pre- and post-survey, etc. to facilitate reflection.

If you utilized partners for your project, engage them in reflection as well. They may fill out evaluation or assessment questionnaires which will help you identify best practices and the possibilities for future service project opportunities.

For educators, reflection is a great tool to assess learning. It should help students connect their tasks with classroom topics. Consider implementing small forms of reflection through journals, exit tickets, small group discussions, etc. throughout the project to monitor student growth.

Step 5

The fifth and final step of your service project is demonstrate. Demonstrating your work will solidify your learning, emphasize the importance of your contribution, and further engage your community. It also allows you and your partners the chance to celebrate your work!

Demonstrating can be done through videos, posters, social media, public service announcements, service fairs, podcasts, articles, etc.

Demonstration will also help you begin to translate your experience into resume, cover letter, and college applications. Consider the skills you gained and now have experience in. When able, use numbers to articulate what you did and the change your actions created.

For example, you may say you contributed 100 hours planning a community clean-up where 50 individuals picked up 2,000 pieces of trash.

Volunteer Iowa also hosts several recognition programs, such as the What's Your 50? campaign, Governor's Volunteer Awards, and the Volunteer Hall of Fame you may qualify to receive.

For educators, demonstrate requires students to articulate their learning and experience to others. You can also use this as an assessment tool as student's final reflection on a project.

Get Involved

Volunteer Iowa is happy to connect and offer guidance to individuals, schools, and community partners interested in service-learning. Please reach out to info@volunteeriowa.org to learn about what resources we offer.

Additional Resources

Youth Changing the World Toolkit (ages 13+)

This toolkit guides youth through the process of service-learning project development. It provides worksheets/handouts to assist throughout the process.

Kids in Action Guide (ages 5-12)

This resource, written by kids, for kids, helps elementary-age children imagine and plan a service project. It features worksheets/handouts for youth.

Semester of Service Toolkit (Educators)

Written by former educators and service-learning experts, the Semester of Service Toolkit guides educators through a service-learning process. It features sample lesson plans, worksheets/handouts, evaluation tools, and service project examples.

Getting Started in Service-Learning (Educators)

This toolkit reviews the four-stage process of service-learning for educators to prepare schools for implementing service-learning in the classroom.