



# Community Partner Handbook

A Resource guide for USM Service-Learning Course Community Partners



# Introduction

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## Welcome

The University of Southern Maine is committed to collaborating with the community to address critical issues in Southern Maine. Through partnerships with businesses and nonprofit organizations, our faculty are engaged in applied research and scholarship, and our students are involved in experiential learning to help shape the future of our region. This handbook is meant to be a starting point for community organizations who may want to collaborate with USM through partnership with a service-learning course.

## What to Expect

As a community partner, you can expect USM to have a genuine interest and stake in the well-being of the Greater Portland and Southern Maine community. You can also expect to have a point of contact at the [Office of Service Learning and Volunteering](#). Staff are available to discuss possibilities for mutually-beneficial collaboration, to support the development of strong and sustainable partnerships, and to connect you with passionate students and faculty who want to take action. See page 7 for support staff contact information.

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# What is Service-Learning?

## Definition

Service learning is a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community.

## Distinctions



As a form of experiential education, service-learning shares similarities with internships, field education, practica, and voluntary service. These forms of education can be placed on a continuum. At one end are internships and practica, with their primary focus on the students' career development. At the other are volunteer activities, in which the emphasis is on the civic involvement and the services provided to recipients. Service-learning is in the middle of the continuum. It is unique in its "intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring."

## Components of Service-Learning



# Principles of Combining Service & Learning

Effective service-learning course partnerships are guided by the following principles:



# Roles & Expectations

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Roles, goals, and expectations will all vary depending on the partnership, who is involved, and the capacities of those individuals and groups. However, below are general understandings for service-learning course partnerships.

## Instructor

- Facilitate students' assignment/choice of a community-based site for their service-learning activities.
- Provide structured opportunities for students to reflect critically on their service experience through writing, reading, group discussion, and classroom activities.
- Make clear the service expectations for students that were agreed upon with partners.
- Balance service-learning activities and other requirements of the course for a coherent and appropriate holistic experience.

## Community Partner

- As a community partner, your organization plays a key role in preparing and supporting students as they work to meet the needs of your clients or other mission-focused goals.
- If necessary/required, facilitate and fund a thorough screening of volunteers through application, interview, and background check.
- Provide an appropriate environment for students, including clear expectations/orientation and a meaningful role
- Provide students with ongoing supervision and on-site support as appropriate to the project and the students' needs.
- Maintain contact with the Office of Service-Learning and Volunteering, reporting any problems, questions or concerns in a timely manner.
- Offer feedback to faculty and students regarding the student's performance and effectiveness in meeting the needs of the community partner.
- Ensure that the work is conducted in accordance with required safety precautions and procedures.
- Make appropriate written arrangements with students, faculty, University, signed by the parties involved.

## Students

- Students should have a clear understanding of the requirements of the community placement/project.
- Students schedule service activities to accommodate their schedules and serve the needs of the community partner.
- Students will take responsibility for their behavior throughout, and should arrive on time, be engaged, and satisfactorily complete service activities, representing USM in a positive manner.
- Provide a minimum of 24 hours' notice to community partner site if unavoidable changes in availability occur.
- Treat all staff and clients with respect.
- Report service hours based on the arrangement made between the community partner and USM.

# Practical Suggestions: Working with Students

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It is important to remember that USM students are students, not volunteers. In addition to helping meet important community needs, students are also utilizing their service experience as the basis for understanding their college course material. We rely on community partners to help students reflect on their service experience and encourage students to explore the broader societal implications of the issue/s your agency addresses.

## **Plan ahead**

Clear, well thought-out descriptions outlining tasks, responsibilities, and skills needed are extremely helpful to students. This could be part of the clarification process.

## **Provide an orientation**

Orientation to your facility or agency is vitally important for students. This orientation may take place at USM, the community agency, or some other location, depending upon the nature of the project. Orientation can include:

- A tour of the facility and an introduction to the staff
- A review of rules, policies, dress codes, timekeeping requirements, and other pertinent information.
- A discussion of the students' role, including specific community expectations.
- A description of the "larger picture:" why you do what you do, and how the students' contributions fit in to your mission.
- A review of skills needed to complete the community project.
- An explanation of any jargon or site-specific language used by the agency or community partners.

## **Keep students' hectic schedules in mind**

Many USM students juggle work and family responsibilities in addition to their full course loads. In order to plan their schedules, most students will need specific and reliable information about expected number of working hours, times, and days of the week they are expected to work (if appropriate), as well as advanced notice of schedule changes if possible.

## **Stay involved**

You are truly a partner in the students' education, and they will benefit tremendously from your guidance throughout all the phases of the community project. They will also appreciate regular feedback on their efforts and acknowledgement of work well done.

## **Say thanks**

Students are often anxious to become involved and make a difference in their community. Like everyone, they want to know if their efforts are appreciated, and to see how their work contributes to your organization's mission. Acknowledging their efforts could range from a simple thank you to letters of recognition.

## **Communicate**

Keep the service-learning course faculty informed of any concerns, successes, or other issues related to the community project. Concerns should be communicated immediately so you and your faculty partner can resolve issues that otherwise might impact the students or the project.

# Dealing with Disruptive Behavior at CP Site

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USM greatly values our community partners. We know you address important issues in our community and serve a wide diversity of populations ranging from K-12 school-based programs to inter-generational programs serving the elderly. We realize many of our community organizations serve vulnerable populations such as at-risk youth, individuals with mental illness, and those with physical limitations. Therefore, we encourage all of our community partners who place our students in direct contact with clients (especially those working with vulnerable populations) to employ all volunteer screening policies at your sites. USM does not mandate any of our students to receive background checks, but we completely support any agency that requires background checks of our students. As an urban University, we know we have a diverse student body which does include students with mental illness and criminal backgrounds. We encourage agencies to follow all of their own volunteer policies to screen USM students in the same way they would screen a volunteer from the general public. Please inform the service-learning course faculty member if you need to restrict a student from entering your site.

If you have any questions about the restriction of a student, please first contact the faculty of the course. You are completely empowered to ask any student to leave your community site for any safety reason. Please use your own protocols for working with problematic volunteers. If you need an additional resource, please call Craig DeForest, Coordinator of Service-Learning and Volunteerism, at USM at 207-228-8284.

## Evaluation & Sustainability

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It is important to USM to ensure your expectations of the service-learning partnership have been met. The Office of Service-Learning and Volunteering always sends out a brief survey at the end of each semester to gather feedback on your experience and the impact of the collaboration. Additional evaluation and efforts to maintain a strong, trusting relationship may take the form of:

- Faculty or staff site visits
- Interviews via phone or email
- Distribution of project-specific evaluations by faculty or departments

Community partners are encouraged to have conversations with faculty and students regarding their experience to improve upon the partnership and student learning. The Office of Service-Learning and Volunteering gets feedback from faculty about their experience at the end of a course and can share useful and relevant information with you.

## Get Connected

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Ready to connect? Contact the office of Service-Learning and Volunteering at 207-780-4284, see us in 4 Payson Smith on the USM Portland campus, or visit us online at <https://usm.maine.edu/service-learning-volunteering>.