Writing the Syllabus: Community-Engaged Scholarship Courses

Well-designed community-engaged scholarship courses integrate course content, academic learning objectives, meaningful outcomes for community partners, and students’ reflective thoughts about their civic agency and responsibility. The syllabus is the primary way to communicate this good design.

Students who see themselves as having a role in facilitating their own learning will be more successful in a community-engaged course. The syllabus should give them a clear understanding of the course learning goals and how the service activities, class discussions, and assignments have been designed to foster that learning.

What follows is an overview of relevant student learning theory as well as sample language to consider including in your own course syllabus.

Student Motivation to Achieve = Value + Expectancy

Expectancy Value Theory (Eccles, 1983) has been used for many years to inform how course goals and expectations are described in our syllabi. The theory indicates the predictors of students’ motivation to do well: value and expectancy.

Value. Students perceive that the course content, projects, and assignments have value. To what extent do students believe what they will do in this course is useful, interesting, enjoyable, and relevant to their lives?

Expectancy (or self-efficacy). Students believe they can be successful in this course. Are the assignment expectations and methods of assessment made clear enough that the students can imagine themselves completing each step successfully?

Community-Engaged Courses are well-suited to address both value and expectancy. Application of course concepts to inform community-engagement work demonstrates the relevance and usefulness of the course content for creating real community benefit. Studies have also shown that pedagogical practices like community-engaged scholarship increase self-efficacy for all students, with even larger positive gains for women and students of color (Kuh, 2009).
While students experience value and expectancy as the course progresses, they may not predict these outcomes initially. Depending on their prior service-learning experiences, some students may anticipate that the service will be an additional hoop to jump through rather than an integral part of their learning. Other students, having less experience with service, may be overwhelmed by your expectations. A well-written syllabus can address these and other concerns.

**Addressing Student Perception of Value: Why Community-Engagement?**

The community-engagement should be integrated into the course, not an add-on. That integration can be communicated by addressing it throughout the syllabus rather than as an addendum.

**The course description** should include a brief overview of the nature of the community-engagement project and make clear how this experience will facilitate learning of the course objectives. It should be clear to students why you have chosen to include community-engagement in the course, that it will be an exciting learning experience, and that the benefits for the community address a real need.

**A statement of Community-Engaged Scholarship values** is also highly recommended. Students should have awareness of what community-engaged scholarship is and what its core principles are. It is also important to prepare students to engage with community partners in ways that are respectful. The Nashman Center provides a [Student Guide to Community-Engaged Scholarship Courses](#) which accomplishes these goals. You are welcome to weave this language into your syllabus or provide the guide to students via Blackboard. It is also available to students through GWServes and through the Nashman Center website.

**Addressing Student Self-Efficacy: Clarity of Instructions and Expectations**

Ballard and Elmore’s Syllabus Construction Checklist (2009) emphasizes clear descriptions and expectations. The syllabus should promote student self-efficacy for the project by describing it clearly.

- What will students do? What will be their roles and responsibilities?
- Where (including directions)?
- With whom? (Individually or in student teams? Who is their community contact?)
- When and for how long? (Provide timelines. When should the service start and when should it be completed? Are minimum hours required?)
- Is the community-engaged scholarship component an optional assignment or required?
- Why? Which course learning objectives are addressed by this engagement?
- How does their community engagement intersect with other elements of the course? (Class discussions, course assignments, etc.)
- How will students demonstrate what they have learned from their community-engagement? How will these assignments be assessed?
- What if? What are the potential risks? (If necessary, attach the Waiver and Release Agreement form to your syllabus. This form is available through GWServes and is also the last page of the Student Guide to Community-Engaged Scholarship Courses). Instructors should collect from students during class and return to the Nashman Center.
**How will the community-engaged scholarship be assessed?** It is a standard of practice that students should not be assigned a grade for the completion of service hours but for demonstrated learning. The assignments and standards of quality that will be used to assess that work must be made clear in the syllabus, and in more detail in the assignment description. Sharing the grading rubric with students in advance and discussing your expectations regarding the depth of reflection, is highly recommended.

In the case of **direct service**, students are often required to complete a certain number of service hours (20 is typical for a 15-week semester). This assignment is analogous to assigned readings - students do not receive a grade simply for being finished. Student learning from their service is assessed through the course assignments which require students to draw upon their service experiences, connect them to readings and classroom discussions, think critically and reflectively, and make meaningful conclusions that demonstrate the course learning objectives.

In the case of **indirect service** projects, students are required to complete a certain product for the community partner, such as a database, an architectural drawing, or a business plan. In these cases, student performance on the product, potentially including feedback from the community partner, is used for learning assessment and is factored into the course grade. Standards of quality and expectations regarding the scope of the finished work should be clear.

**Optional Assignments.** Every effort should be made to provide a community-engagement experience that is a reasonable option for all students, including, for example, students with disabilities and students with severe scheduling restraints due to family or work responsibilities. However, on rare occasions, a student will be unable to participate in the community-engaged element of your course. While it may or may not appear on the syllabus, be prepared with an alternative assignment that is equivalent in effort and addresses the same course learning goals. Library research papers or class presentations on relevant topics are a typical option.

**Community Partner Information**

If you have already identified the community partner(s), either your syllabus or an addendum should describe how the partnership represents a mutually beneficial fit for the project. Students should also learn about the context of the project, including the organizational mission, the relevant history of the community it serves, and other details to prepare students to engage sensitively and effectively. Practical information should be included as well, such as the names and contact information of key staff, public transportation instructions, hours of operation, dates of orientation or training, and other pre-service requirements such as police background checks or finger-printing.

Much of this information sharing can be accomplished through GWServes at https://gwserves.givepulse.com/group/affiliates/128546. We strongly recommend using this platform to facilitate clear communication between instructors, students, and community partners. If learning how to find a community organization and co-create a mutually beneficial project is tied to the course learning goals, then the syllabus should make your expectations for the project and the nature of the partnership clear. Allow time in class to provide instruction on how to locate an organization and communicate about the project professionally with the staff. Students should be
instructed to identify themselves as GW students, including which course they are in, who their instructor is, and the nature of their assignment (service hours, project, etc.). Set a deadline for students to submit their proposed project that allows time for your review and approval before they begin their work. A project proposal worksheet can help students know what issues to address as they work with a community partner to plan the project.

Sample Syllabus Language

The following examples are provided as starting point. Please edit and shift the language to be a fit with your course.

What is Community-Engaged Scholarship? This course is considered a “Community-Engaged Scholarship Course,” which means it involves collaboration between the instructor, students, and partner community organizations to address issues of the common good. The community engagement in this course will make the learning more relevant and challenging as students will connect their knowledge and skills to real, complex, community concerns. While this work will facilitate learning of my academic course objectives, it will also invite reflection on your beliefs about civic responsibility and your sense of purpose in the world.

The Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service provides support to our course. One important resource is the Student Handbook for Community-Engaged Scholarship Courses. It provides a step-by-step process to help you get started, a list of issues to be sure you communicate with your community partner about (e.g. how you are expected to dress, whether training is required before you begin). It also includes a valuable list of tips to help you stay safe as you serve, and what to do if you have an accident or need to report a concern. The handbook is available to you on our course page in GWServes.givepulse.com.

Reporting Your Service Activities. For this course, students should plan to serve a minimum of 20 hours with their partner organization. Your transportation time to and from the service site does not “count” toward this requirement, but any orientation and training provided by the partner organization does.

Students will report their community-engagement/service activities using GWServes, an online platform: https://gwserves.givepulse.com/group/classes/128546. Using the same sign-in and password as other GW platforms, login and complete as much of your student profile as you like. You will receive an invitation and link to join our course, via email. This course page is where you will report your hours served and the impact you made during that time. From this page, I will be able to monitor whether students are staying on track and can communicate with you and our community partners about any concerns or new ideas that might arise.

Background Checks for Serving with DC Public Schools. Children are considered a vulnerable population, and it is quite common for schools to require a background check for anyone providing services with the children or in the school building. The DCPS background checks can be cumbersome but should not be a barrier to GW students engaging with local schools. The Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service helps facilitate this process for GW students through the Certified to Serve program.
Certified to Serve

**Step one: TB Testing.** The printed result of your negative TB test is required for “step two” so you will need to do this first. Some students do this through their home doctors prior to coming to campus. If you did this, please remember to bring the printed results with you.

You can also have your TB testing done through GW’s Colonial Health Center. The Nashman Center will cover the cost of this testing, but students must do the following:
- Complete this Form ([go.gwu.edu/nashmanTB](go.gwu.edu/nashmanTB))
- Visit the Nashman Center to get a TB Test Voucher
- Bring the Voucher to the Colonial Health Center for the TB Test

No appointment for TB testing is necessary, walk-in visits are available during the times below. Note that you can also receive other immunizations during this appointment.
- Tuesdays or Wednesdays: 9am-12:30pm or 2-3pm.
- Fridays: 10:30am-12:30pm

**Step two: DCPS Fingerprinting.** Bring printed copies of: TB test results, ID (driver’s license/passport), and your most updated physical and immunization records.
- Thursday, September 6th, time TBD, but typically is 1-4pm, Marvin Center 405
- Wednesday, September 12th, time TBD, but typically is 1-4pm, Marvin Center 405
  - Note this date coincides with the Nashman Center’s Community Service Fair, also in the Marvin Center.

**The GW Symposium on Community-Engaged Scholarship**

The GW Symposium on Community-Engaged Scholarship is an event for students, faculty, and community partners, held at the end of every semester. It facilitates dialogue across academic departments, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies about GW’s continued role in partnering for positive change and greater equity in our city. A free event, it includes a lunch speaker, student presentations of their community-engagement projects, and discussion sessions on a variety of topics. This semester, the Symposium is scheduled for Friday, April 26th, noon-3:30pm. RSVP’s are required, link here for more information: [https://www.gwnashmancenter.org/symposium/](https://www.gwnashmancenter.org/symposium/)

- For this course, attending the Symposium to participate in these conversations is a 10-point assignment. If you are unable to attend due to scheduling concerns, you may earn these points through a 2-page reflection paper.
- For this course, the “Showcase presentation” assignment (for 25-points) will be delivered at the Symposium. Keep in mind, to receive the full 25 points, you should participate in both your showcase presentation and in a concurrent discussion session of your choice. If your class schedule conflicts with the Symposium schedule (Friday, April 26th, noon-3:30pm), please let me know at the beginning of the semester and we will agree on an equivalent alternative assignment.
References


*This Nashman Faculty Resource Guide was authored by Dr. Wendy Wagner, Senior Program Manager for Community-Engaged Scholarship. Please contact her for additional resources or a consultation: wagnerw@gwu.edu.*