

DESIGNING A PLAN

AGENDA

- The Importance of a Well-Crafted Plan
- The Parts of a Plan
- Student-Needs Assessment
- The Necessary Research

The Importance of a Well-Crafted Plan

The service learning project is designed to be a vehicle for students to apply what they've learned and to have a positive, community-centered experience. It's the process—the opportunity to prepare for the project and the desire to make a contribution to the community—that's most important. If your students are able to practice and implement what they've learned in your classroom, then the service learning project is a success.

Creating an action plan is a crucial step of the service learning project process. The plan has several purposes:

- Outline exactly which resources are available and which must be acquired for the project
- Provide a schedule and a time line
- Encourage critical examination of the project's scope in light of the resources available

The creation of an action plan by students is primarily an exercise in goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and communication skills, as well as an opportunity to practice effective writing. The finished action plan will serve as students' ongoing guide to project completion, providing a framework for where they're going and a map for how they plan to get there. It should clearly outline the materials, people, and tasks that will comprise the project, as well as a time line that indicates what will happen and when.

Take the time to ensure that your students recognize the relevance of the action plan to more than just the project at hand. Explain that any well-prepared project or task, including those that occur in the workplace, has an action plan that participants can follow and refer to. (An example might be the lesson plans that you, as an educator, prepare and follow.) Just like in the workplace, this project will need to be reviewed and approved by the people who manage the school and are responsible for the students (e.g., principals, administrators, teachers).

Creating an action plan primarily involves considering the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Gathering the information that answers these questions and organizing that information in a written document are the steps to creating an action plan. This section of the module outlines the parts of the plan and what questions each part should address. It also suggests a variety of methods for finding the answers.

Don't limit the questions to those suggested here. Use the module only as a guide and encourage your students to delve deeper into the details of their project, to ask additional questions, and to consider the project's specific needs. As a general rule, if an issue is under consideration by the project planners, it should be addressed somewhere in the action plan.

The Parts of a Plan

Steps to Be Taken

A well-crafted plan should answer the following questions: What is the goal of the project? What will happen during the project? What steps led up to the project? What are the stepping stones to reaching the goal?

Students create a working list of steps by working backward. You and your students should create a mental picture of the ideal project and how it will look at completion. Using this mental picture, determine the following:

- Who is involved?
- What are they doing?
- Are they using any particular materials?
- What kinds of facilities are at their disposal?

Work backward to determine how each of the elements that are in the mental picture must be contacted and secured.

Students should also create a series of lists onto which they will record their work. The lists can be entitled “People,” “Materials,” and “Activities.” (See examples in section 4.) Alternatively, each list might be titled with the description of an activity and contain information on the people needed, the materials that must be secured, and the tasks that must be completed in order to perform the activity. Explain that these lists can be running lists to which items are added or taken away as the discussion and the action plan become more detailed.

Materials

Every project requires materials. Students who decide to clean up a local park will need to identify and gather the tools necessary for cleaning. Students who decide to launch a letter-writing campaign to support an issue will need to gather writing materials. It is important to create a list that covers all possible needs; students may decide later that certain materials are not necessary, but suggest that they err on the side of caution. It is discouraging and frustrating not to have an item when it is needed.

As discussed above, a materials list may stand alone or be integrated into the description of each project activity. In addition, encourage students to consider what they will need to do in order to gather the materials for the project—gathering materials might require obtaining postage, a telephone, paper, and envelopes. If publicizing the project is a priority, remind students to consider the materials that they will need in order to inform others of their project (e.g., paper, poster board, printers).

Encourage students to revisit the steps they need to take and carefully check the materials list against each step.

If your school has a website, speak with the site's administrator about publicizing and requesting help and support for your class's project on the website. If possible, have students design portions of the project's web advertisements. You might also encourage students to code the advertisements themselves and submit them to the administrator for approval—many students who are interested in technology careers are eager for projects that will allow them to build their web-design portfolios.

Necessary Approvals

Because the project will most likely require time, resources, and activities that are not part of the typical school day, it's important to inform those in charge. Students should submit their plans and get official approval for the project if approval is required. Consider the following:

- Who needs to know that your students are doing a service learning project? How do you need to inform them? Are there special forms to be completed? Whose signatures are required?
- Does the project require the approval of the principal, the superintendent, and/or any local government agencies (particularly if you plan to clean up a local park or beach)?
- Do parents need to be notified? If so, how and when?
- Will the project require the teacher to be away from the school for a day? Will a substitute need to be found for that day? If so, what needs to be done in order to hire the substitute?

Encourage students to revisit the steps they need to take and their materials lists, and list items such as field trips or telephone access that may also require specific approvals.

Time and People Resources

Although tangible materials and approvals are necessary for a project, the skills and time commitments of participants are in many ways a project's most valuable resources. Urge students to consider the following as they work to identify how much time and which people the project will require:

- Whose time will be needed? When? For how long? Remind students to consider your time and whether you will be needed outside of class.
- Are certain resources available only at certain times? For example, can calls related to the project be made only at certain times from a certain telephone?
- Will all students be able to give the time required for their schoolwork and still be able to complete the project as scheduled?
- How many people must participate in the actual execution of the project? Is everyone in the class needed? Do they need to recruit additional people?
- What roles are students interested in taking on? How do they wish to organize themselves? Do they need team leaders, task managers, communications specialists, and so on? What are the descriptions for each of these jobs?
- Who can teach students about the facts/rules they should keep in mind for their particular project (e.g., special considerations for working with senior citizens, health considerations when cleaning a park, things to know about working with younger students)?
- Will students be working with an outside group or agency to complete the project? What are the limitations for the agency's time and people resources?

Encourage collaboration with other groups or agencies whose experience and resources will help students to better implement their projects. In addition to providing a great opportunity to practice teamwork and communication skills, working with other groups means further exposure to the world outside of school, to new career options, and to potential role models. If students choose to complete the project in cooperation with another group, urge them to consider the who, what, why, when, where, and how details of this collaboration:

- What organization will the group contact?
- Who will contact the organization?
- When does the organization need to be contacted?
- How should that organization be contacted? What should be said?
- What exactly will the organization's role be?

Consider creating a contract with any outside organizations to formalize their commitment and demonstrate how serious students are about this project.

Student-Needs Assessment

The service learning project is primarily an opportunity for your students to practice their life skills. In particular, on-the-job and communication skills may need to be reviewed in relation to project planning. You may want students to practice these skills before they need to use them. Questions to consider include the following:

- Will students need to make phone calls to businesses, organizations, or agencies? Will they need to write business letters?
- Are there any physical or academic skills that your students must develop in order to complete the project? For example, if they have chosen to record books for the blind, it's important that they are skilled at reading aloud.
- If your students are not versed in the skills needed, how can you address this? What's the most efficient way to help them develop their skills?

The Necessary Research

The purpose of research in the context of a service learning project is twofold. First, students will gather information to support the need for the project and search for answers to questions regarding the necessary steps, materials, approvals, skills, and time required to complete the project. The amount of information that's needed to create the plan may seem overwhelming, but it is available. Identifying that information will be fairly easy because you and your students have taken the time to assess the project needs and know what to look for.

Second, many professional and academic situations require students to effectively gather information, a skill that's also required to make good decisions. This is an excellent opportunity for students to hone their information-gathering skills and to use what they learn in order to make decisions about the project.

Help students organize their research efforts so that work is not duplicated among groups of students. The following are strategies for organizing students' research efforts:

- Divide the class into small groups. Each group is responsible for finding answers to all of the questions posed, but each will use a different research method.
- Invite individuals to choose a research method they are interested in utilizing, allowing no more than four or five students to choose any one method. Remind students that one method may seem more interesting than another, but it may be more difficult to access (e.g., in-person interviews). Each student is then responsible for researching all of the questions posed, using the method of research they have chosen.
- Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group a few of the questions posed. Encourage each group to use all of the research methods at their disposal.

Consider both the strengths and weaknesses of your students, and the other methods by which the project is being organized. The way you choose to organize research efforts should reflect your students' current level of commitment to the project. You can gauge that level of commitment by asking yourself questions such as the following:

- Does every aspect of the project seem to be centered around group work? Do students need an opportunity to conduct research individually for grading purposes or for skill development?
- Are small groups experiencing personality conflicts? Could research be used as an opportunity to have students work in different groups than those in which they'll be working for the duration of the project, thus restoring commitment to the larger group?
- Can students working on several small-group projects combine their research efforts on any common issues in order to develop a sense of class unity? (For example, two groups working on projects focused on elementary school students may wish to combine their research efforts on the stages of child development.)

Many resources are available to help students find the information that they are looking for. The following are some suggested methods that should be available to your students.

Guest Speakers/Interviews

When possible, accessing a primary source is the best way to get information. Primary sources include people who have personally participated in other service learning projects, people who work at the organization to which students are offering service, or people who have had similar experiences. Learning about the process that others have used to develop service learning or community service projects can be very beneficial even if the project topics differ.

Ask students if they know of others in their school who have participated in service learning projects. Encourage them to find out, either by asking around in the school or contacting local organizations. Ask students to research what steps these people followed and what lessons they learned. Help students to invite guests who can speak in the classroom about their project experiences or about the resources necessary for the project your students want to complete. If guests are unavailable to visit, help students arrange one-on-one or small-group interviews in person or by phone. In either case, remind students that the best way to ensure they get all the information they need is to prepare a list of questions before the interview.

Before a guest speaker makes an appearance in the classroom, discuss with students the procedures and expectations surrounding the speaker's presentation (e.g., students should avoid side conversations, determine what kinds of questions are appropriate to ask, and consider the procedure for asking questions). Establish and explain to students the repercussions of displaying inappropriate behavior or asking inappropriate questions. Encourage students to take notes during the presentation.

Your students may be unsure of where to begin their search for a speaker or a person whom they can interview. The best place to begin is the local phone book. Even if the first few organizations they contact can't help, they will most likely be able to refer your students to someone who can. Another option is for students to contact one of the national organizations listed below and to explain what kind of information they are looking for. These agencies have a broad geographic network and may be able to suggest someone in your area whom your students should contact.

If students plan to contact these agencies by phone, suggest that they write down exactly what they want to say (i.e., who is calling and for what purpose) before making the call. Explain that it's easy to get flustered on the phone and it can become difficult to express yourself clearly, especially if you are being transferred to different people and must repeat yourself several times.