

Guiding Principles for Reducing Risk in Service Learning

The following guiding principles are considered best practices throughout the field and apply to all the parties involved in service-learning experiences: service-learning staff, faculty members, community-based organizations and service-learning students. Since each service-learning course is different, these guidelines are not intended to be all encompassing. However, these do's and don'ts apply to most situations. (If you feel something included here is prohibitive to the service-learning experience you hope to offer to your students, please have a discussion that includes the faculty member, the service-learning office, and a university risk manager.) The intent of these guidelines is not to prohibit service-learning experiences, but rather, to provide best practices that allow for safe and positive service environments where the risk and liability have been minimized.

DO provide campus- and community-based organization orientations to familiarize students with policies, procedures and risks involved in the specific service activities they will be providing and with the populations they serve.

DO discuss the Service Learning Plan with students so they fully understand their responsibilities, learning objectives and service objectives, and are informed of the risks associated with their service learning placements. Students should sign the SL Plan, and have their site supervisor(s) and faculty member review and sign it as well.

DO build a working relationship with your risk manager and contracts and procurement officer.

DO conduct site reviews before, during and after a service-learning course is offered.

DO understand that faculty members can be individually named in lawsuits and should play an active role in ensuring safe and positive service-learning experiences for their students.

DO know that faculty members will be indemnified and protected by the university in the case of a lawsuit, so long as the faculty member was acting within the scope of his or her work.

DO offer alternative placements and/or opportunities for students in service-learning courses to avoid potential risks.

DO meet the special safety needs of any student.

DO be aware that there is state and federal regulations regarding fingerprinting and background checks for those students whose service-learning placements are in organizations that work with children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities.

DO know when each student is scheduled to provide service and be able to verify that the student did provide the service at the community-based organization site. This will help to determine who holds liability for student behavior or student injury at any given time.

DO know where emergency contact information for students is kept, and what the procedures are at the university and at the community-based organization site if an emergency occurs. If the community-based organization asks the student for emergency contact information, a copy should be kept at the university for the duration of the service- learning experience.

DON'T assume that students are automatically covered for liability through the university or community-based organization when they enroll in courses and participate in service-learning activities.

DON'T assume that campus and site orientations are consistent; they vary among courses, campuses, departments and community-based organizations.

DON'T assume individual faculty members or departments are aware of the students' whereabouts or activities while performing their service learning.

DON'T assume that students are aware of such issues as liability or sexual harassment policies. Both campus and site orientations are necessary to familiarize students with any potential risks involved with service-learning activities.

DON'T assume that student fees will automatically absorb incidental costs for fingerprinting and background checks, or that the community-based organization will pay these fees. They can be an additional financial burden for a particular placement.

DON'T arrange travel for students. Liability is greatly reduced if students are responsible for their own transportation to and from the service site.