

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a teaching method that engages young people in solving community problems as part of their academic studies or other intentional learning activity. When applied appropriately, service-learning can have a dramatic impact on teaching and learning, as well as on the community:

- Students enhance their understanding of academic content and community issues; develop essential skills to be able to effect positive change; and nurture life-long attitudes of efficacy and responsibility;
- Educators expand their instructional repertoire, reinforce their commitment to teaching, and broaden their appreciation for the ability of young people to be a force for positive change; and
- Communities prosper from a more engaged and principled citizenry.

Because of its considerable potential, service-learning has in recent years experienced significant growth and visibility. It has become increasingly important among service-learning advocates, however, to ensure that this expansion does not occur at the expense of program quality. Too often, for example, community service is mistaken for service-learning. Though community service is undeniably valuable, both its process and outcomes are notably different from those service-learning. This example illustrates some of the distinction: Picking up trash by a riverbank is (community) service; studying water samples under a microscope is learning; when students collect and analyze water samples and collaborate with the local pollution control agency to develop and enact a river clean-up plan ... that is service-learning.

In order for environmental educators to implement effective service-learning, it's essential to understand how it is different from and similar to many other modes of service. Therefore, the proposal review team seeks proposals that explore how service-learning, when applied properly, can advance important goals of environmental education such as developing civic skills and engagement; and fostering deep understanding of connected academic, environmental, and social topics. Special attention will be placed on those that address one or more of the following criteria for high quality service-learning:

1. Youth voice—ensuring that students have authentic opportunities to make program-related decisions, particularly related to the selection of the nature and scope of the project
2. Reflection—regularly infusing higher order thinking skills into reflections upon experiences and lessons learned
3. Community partnerships—ensuring students have direct contact with community members and environments, and addressing an authentic environmental need
4. Civic development—facilitating deliberation, group decision-making, and other practices that promote democratic classroom environments and students' civic competencies
5. Link to standards—infusing program activities directly into existing educational standards