



Teacher Guide

Service Learning

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1. Definition of Service Learning

The [National Youth Leadership Council](#) defines service learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” If students are actively engaged through ongoing or project-based learning that provides a service or improvement to the greater community, they are engaged in service learning. This is commonly incorporated into a single course or series of courses and may also be the basis for student development through Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) programs and/or local FFA programming. Many agricultural education programs connect with the local community by conducting a service project based on the needs of the school district, city, or county. If these projects also enable students to learn technical skills and knowledge or gain generally needed employability and interpersonal skills, this may also be correctly deemed as service learning. Many educators find service learning to be an impactful, long-lasting strategy for teaching and learning, and these programs build a common sense of civic duty, support, and connection to other individuals, groups, and organizations outside of the agricultural education program.

2. Benefits of Service Learning

Service learning has many tangible benefits to those *servicing* and those *being served*. Five areas of positive impact that result from effective service-learning programs are:

1. *Learning Enhancement Outcomes*, such as increased comprehension and retention
2. *Personal Growth Outcomes*, such as personal efficacy and identity
3. *Social Responsibility Outcomes*, such as civic duty and a value for service
4. *Career Development*, such as professional contacts and learned technical skills
5. *Positive Relationships* with peers, teachers, and other project volunteers

3. Models for Community Engagement

What does service learning look like in a practical context? There are six commonly accepted models for engaging the local community with the agricultural education program. They are:

1. Discipline-Based
2. Problem-Based
3. Capstone Course
4. Service-Learning SAE Programs
5. Community-Based Agriscience Research
6. Independent Study for Academic Credit

Discipline-Based

In the discipline-based model, students are expected to have a presence in the community through the designated learning period and reflect on their experiences at scheduled intervals or the conclusion of the experience. In these reflections, they use the related skills and knowledge gained as a basis for analysis and understanding of the key issues facing the respective community that was served. In agricultural education, students are incentivized to complete community service through different award programs, such as the sequentially earned and coveted FFA Degrees. This would be an example of discipline-based service learning. Progress is commonly measured by time spent planning, working, and learning. It can also be beneficial for future reflection and development to collect other measurements, such as the number of individuals served, quantity of items collected for donation, and even dollars generated by the project.

Problem-Based

In the problem-based model, students relate to the community in the role of “consultant” and “servicer” by both identifying a local need and planning/operating a solution to the respective problem. Students will commonly work with community members to identify and understand a particular problem. The model presumes that the students have or will develop knowledge and skills with which to help communities to solve a problem. This may be in the form of knowledge or technical expertise (such as care for plants and animals, knowledge of natural resources and ecosystem management, or employability and interpersonal skills) or as additional resources that can be leveraged to solve the problem (such as a program greenhouse or nursery, additional funding, and even equipment that suits the proposed solution). This model is commonly implemented with a specific AFNR course, such as Introduction to the Agricultural Industry or Agricultural Leadership and Communication.

Capstone Course

These courses are often reserved for those who have identified a specific area of personal interest and a high level of maturity and professionalism. It is also worth noting that these courses are almost exclusively offered to students in their final year of study. Capstone courses ask students to draw upon past knowledge, experiences, and observations made through the students’ agricultural education career. The goal of a capstone course should be exploring a new topic or synthesizing students’ understanding of a specific career or pathway in AFNR.

Service-Learning SAE Programs

A service-learning SAE program is conducted by one or more students in which they plan, conduct, and evaluate a project designed to provide a service to the school, public entities, or the community. It must provide a measurable benefit to a specific organization, group or individual other than the FFA chapter and agricultural education program. Quality service-learning SAE programs exhibit several indicators. They are:

- The student(s) develop an SAE Service-Learning Plan. A template for this plan is available from the National FFA Organization and on the Agricultural Experience Tracker [website](#).
- Projects operate under the overview of a local committee to which the student management team (teachers, administrators, parents, etc.) provides regular updates.
- Projects provide varying levels of student responsibility to allow for skill development and student achievement through one or more FFA award programs.
- Programs operate in the local school, community, or beyond and provide real world applications
- Programs provide a summary report of the impact of the project to the local school and community.
- Students write and develop a reflection paper, presentation, or other projects to describe their growth from the experience.

Community-Based Agriscience Research

The FFA Agriscience Fair program recognizes students who gain real-world, hands-on experience in agricultural enterprises. Students use scientific principles and emerging technologies to solve complex problems related to AFNR. The Agriscience Fair organizes projects into categories for scoring and comparison. One category uniquely suited for those students interested in the analysis and research of service learning and community engagement is the Social Science category. Examples of social science projects that align to service-learning opportunities are investigating the perceptions of community members toward agricultural practices and careers, determining the impact of AFNR-related service-

learning projects and programs, and developing consumer confidence and understanding of local and regional food sources.

Independent Study for Academic Credit

Students interested in studying a unique project or problem may find success in enrolling in a recognized independent study course as a part of the AFNR program. Independent study courses can be specific to a recognized AFNR pathway or even a specific problem. Courses still are supervised by a qualified agricultural education professional, but students are much more self-sufficient in the gathering of resources, asking questions, analyzing problems, and planning/enacting potential solutions.

4. Identifying Community Needs through the FFA Program of Activities Quality Standards

A Program of Activities (POA) is a comprehensive summary of activities and events FFA chapters activities hold and operate throughout the year. Each chapter annually builds its POA around three major areas called divisions. The three recognized divisions (Growing Leaders, Building Communities, and Strengthening Agriculture) focus on the types of activities a chapter will conduct. Each division has five recognized quality standards. These standards provide a key starting point for students, teachers, and community leaders to identify local needs that align to the roles and responsibilities of the FFA organization.

After reviewing the quality standards, students should work with educators and community leaders to identify local needs and potential solutions in an organized and deliberate manner. The POA divisions and quality standards are shown below in **Figure 1**, with corresponding service-learning activities. Activities listed to do not represent the full scope of potential projects or programs available for each quality standard. These recommended activities offer a good starting point for identifying potential projects, but the best service-learning activities directly relate to an identified local need.

Figure 1. Quality Standards for FFA Programs

Division 1. Growing Leaders	
Leadership: Activities that help the individual develop technical, human relations, and decision-making skills to grow leaders.	Service-Learning Activities: Hosting leadership trainings for community groups and other youth organizations, hosting life skills workshops for students and adults seeking gainful employment in the community, service-oriented leadership competitions for individuals or teams
Healthy Lifestyle: Activities that promote the well-being of students mentally or physically in achieving the positive evolution of the whole person.	Service-Learning Activities: Hosting substance abuse prevention and education programs; conducting campaigns for personal wellness choices and consequences, diversity, inclusion, and equity forums and initiatives; active or recreational fundraising for community needs
Scholarship: Activities that develop a positive attitude toward lifelong learning experiences.	Service-Learning Activities: Fundraising for scholarship programs; sponsoring tutoring, mentoring programs, elementary or middle school reading programs; hosting study skills workshops; or facilitating small study groups
Personal Growth: Activities conducted that improve the identity and self-awareness of members. These activities should reflect the members' unique talents and potential by reinforcing their human and employability skills. The activities should strive to enhance the quality of life and contribute to members' life goals and development.	Service-Learning Activities: Hosting workshops pertaining to time- or task-management strategies, self-help workshops, and support systems; hosting financial management or planning workshops for FFA and/or community members; conducting diversity, inclusion, equity forums and initiatives; organizing anti-bullying programs
Career Success: Activities that promote student involvement and growth through agriculture-related experiences and/or entrepreneurship and promote career readiness.	Service-Learning Activities: Hosting career-related skills workshops, fairs, or other programs; hosting free Agriscience Fairs and workshops for elementary, middle, and high school students
Division 2. Building Communities	
Environmental: Activities conducted to preserve natural resources and develop more environmentally responsible individuals.	Service-Learning Activities: Urban and rural conservation programs, collaborative efforts to raise game for release/biological control, water and air quality programs, green practices, provide water testing, recycling programs, National FFA Living to Serve Grants

Human Resources: Activities conducted to improve the welfare and well-being of members and citizens of the community.	Service-Learning Activities: PALS (Partners in Active Learning Support), special populations involvement, at-risk programs, cultural awareness and diversity programs, provide an after-school program for younger children, setup a community garden, food/toy drives, National FFA Living to Serve Grants, Farm to School Initiative
Citizenship: Activities conducted to encourage members to become active, involved citizens of their school, community, and country.	Service-Learning Activities: Volunteerism, community service, civic duties, internships with government agencies, roadside/area cleanup, legislative breakfasts, work with local chamber of commerce, organize a charity concert, networking with governmental agencies
Stakeholder Engagement: Activities conducted to develop teamwork and cooperation between the local chapter and stakeholders.	Service-Learning Activities: Working with another entity to strengthen agriculture and community engagement –for example, Corn Growers, Young Farmers, Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Grange, chambers of commerce, service clubs, extension, fair boards, local advisory committee, parent-teacher organization participation, etc.
Economic Development: Activities conducted to improve the economic welfare of the community.	Service-Learning Activities: Member entrepreneurship, community scavenger hunt, enhanced tourism, international development, historical preservation, and community relations
Division 3. Strengthening Agriculture	
Support Group: Activities conducted to develop and maintain positive relations among FFA, parents, and community leaders who are interested in supporting agricultural education.	Service-Learning Activities: Any activities that serve the community coordinated with FFA alumni, agriculture boosters, or other organized groups dedicated to supporting active FFA chapters
Chapter Recruitment: Activities conducted to increase agricultural education enrollment and/or FFA membership and encourage greater participation.	Service-Learning Activities: Mentoring programs for new or prospective FFA members; service activities coordinated with future members in elementary or middle school grade bands
Safety: Activities that enhance safety in the community.	Service-Learning Activities: Firearm safety programs, ATV safety, equipment operation safety, mock crashes, general farm safety, texting and driving campaigns, safe animal handling demonstrations, pesticide application safety awareness activities, producer and consumer safety programs, personal safety programs
Agricultural Advocacy: Activities conducted to articulate and promote agricultural programs, practices, policies, and/or education to elicit action.	Service-Learning Activities: Agriculture issue presentations, parent/student orientations, engaging policymakers to promote action on hunger, interacting with local media to promote service activities relating to agriculture and FFA, use of social media to support service-oriented agricultural causes, encouraging animal welfare practices
Agricultural Literacy: Activities that help consumers become better informed about the production, distribution, and daily impact of food, fiber, and fuel.	Service-Learning Activities: Food for America, Agriculture in the Classroom; Food Checkout Day; activities centered around national food promotions (e.g., Dairy Month); agriculturally related educational events and/or displays, educating consumers about hunger, food cost, and food safety; Our Food Link activities; Food, Land, and People; partnering with local fair or festival boards to include food-related educational components in events; alternative fuel education; product awareness as it relates to agriculture (e.g., clothing, medicines, paper, etc.)

5. Service-Learning Resources from the National FFA Organization

A common misconception is that service learning is the same as community service, but there are distinct and important differences. Service learning is much more intentional, and students are engaged in the problem analysis, identification and solution, planning, and operational components of the project. Service learning often requires longer, ongoing time and attention while community service may occur in a single hour or day.

The National FFA Organization offers additional resources for understanding this difference and supporting those students engaged in service learning.

The [National Days of Service](#) program brings the last line of the FFA motto “Living to Serve” into focus as FFA chapters across the country can register a service event to be hosted in February (to align with National FFA Week activities) or October (to align with National FFA Convention media campaigns).

[Living to Serve grants](#) provide an opportunity for FFA chapters (to include middle school, high school, or alumni/collegiate organizations) and state FFA associations/foundations to seek funding to support various types of service projects through a competitive application process.

National FFA also breaks down the commonly used language on service, including different [types of service](#) activities to provide clarity and standardization as FFA chapters work together on different projects.

6. Insight on Service-Learning from an Illinois Agricultural Education Program

Waterloo High School is home to a national recognized FFA chapter and agricultural education program. A key component to the success of the program is the emphasis on service learning. Many of the models and strategies listed in this document have been utilized by teachers and students at Waterloo to connect with local groups and organizations while serving key needs and solving local problems. Listed below are some examples of service-learning projects previously conducted by the chapter.

Babler Farms Natural Resource Preservation

The chapter has worked to preserve and improve the wildlife habitat at a local natural area called Babler Farms. Babler Farms is home to different wildlife species and diverse habitat types. Students worked with stakeholders to improve the habitat in many ways, such as cleaning up trash and debris, maintaining grass and water habitats, and even constructing wooden duck houses. Leveraging the knowledge and skills they’ve gained through agricultural education courses like Basic Agricultural Mechanics and resources like the tools and working space in the program’s expansive mechanics shop, students are able to serve their community in a meaningful way while gaining experience in planning, operating, and reflecting on a complex project.

The Sharing Cupboard

The Sharing Cupboard is a project conducted by the chapter in partnership with the House of Neighborly Service (HNS), a local community outreach group in Monroe County. Students recognized that the community has numerous people who rely on food pantries for subsistence. The purpose of this activity was to teach people how to make quality meals from donated goods. Students helped to promote, plan, and host monthly cooking classes for families utilizing resources from various local food pantries.

The Garden Bed Project

Students in the Introduction to Agricultural Industry course identified a community need to provide a source of fresh vegetables for residents at a local low-income senior housing facility. Students partnered with HNS to plan, construct, and install two raised garden beds, creating an accessible growing area for elderly residents. In addition to creating a sustainable source of fresh, locally grown food, residents also gained a healthy outdoor task and improved quality of life. This activity encouraged members to become more involved in the community and more knowledgeable of different local needs. Members continue to engage with this project as they periodically visit and help to maintain the garden beds.

Farm-to-Store

Students recognized that many citizens do not fully understand where their food comes from. A dedicated committee of students partnered with the local county Farm Bureau to plan and conduct hands-on educational activities that taught visitors at a local grocer the source, processes, and supply chain of commonly purchased food items. In addition to these activities, students were able to utilize knowledge gained in their agriculture courses and SAE projects to have conversations with consumers about various production-related topics and questions.

Tim McDermott, a former agriculture teacher and current administrator at Waterloo High School, credits the program's continued growth and success to the different strategic partners and the service-learning culture of the program. Tim explained that "students are able to see the fruits of their labor and gain valuable skills when we partner with others to serve the community. I love watching the kids get excited about helping those in need, and I know these are the experiences they will remember after they've graduated and moved on from our program." Service learning is a proven model across all agricultural education programs in Illinois, and these experiences without fail mold students into outstanding leaders and young professionals.

7. Additional Resources Pertaining to Service Learning

For more information on implementation of service-learning activities, see the list below.

- Furco, Andrew. Billig, Shelley H. "Service-Learning: The Essence of the Pedagogy." Information Age Publishing, 2001. Greenwich, CT.
- "Service Learning." *Edutopia*, ([Link](#))
- "Service Learning SAE." *National FFA Organization* ([Link](#))
- Webb, Michael B. "A Guide to Service Learning." New Visions for Public Schools, 2001.