



# Interdisciplinary Models of Service-Learning in Higher Education

Source: K. Connors and S. D. Seifer, *Community-Campus Partnerships for Health*, September 2005

For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org).

## Introduction

The combination of service-learning and interdisciplinary learning is gaining momentum in higher education. A growing body of evidence identifies promising and lasting outcomes associated with their integration. Collaborative problem solving and appreciation for diverse ways of thinking, for example, contribute to the development of broad and comprehensive approaches to complex problems that cut across disciplines and can benefit students, communities and campuses. This fact sheet highlights successful interdisciplinary models of service-learning in higher education and relevant resources.

## What does interdisciplinary learning mean?

Interdisciplinary learning is a methodology that includes learners from different disciplines that work closely together contributing their knowledge, skill set and experience to support and enhance the contributions and attributes of each discipline. Interdisciplinary learning initiatives are proliferating throughout higher education at an unprecedented rate (DeZure 1999; Creamer 2005). They can be found in general education, replacing and augmenting distribution requirements; in emerging disciplines, such as cultural and gender studies, environmental studies, and neuroscience; in new pedagogies, such as collaborative learning, discovery and problem-based learning; in the use of technology, such as distance learning and web-based instruction; and in new curricular designs, such as learning communities, capstone courses, and service-learning. In interdisciplinary service-learning, students from different fields, disciplines or professions share service and learning objectives.

## What trends support interdisciplinary service-learning?

Academic institutions have traditionally emphasized and rewarded discipline-specific teaching and research instead of collaboration across disciplines (Boyer 1990). A number of converging trends have led to a growing acceptance of interdisciplinary learning in general and interdisciplinary service-learning in particular. The issues facing communities today are changing rapidly and in some ways are more complex than in the past. These issues demand approaches to problem-solving that draw on the skills and perspectives of diverse disciplines and professions. The endurance of poverty, joblessness and homelessness in a demanding social and economic environment place greater stress on social service infrastructures designed to support individuals and families. Changes in workforce expectations have also placed greater demands on employees and professionals with skills in team approaches to problem-solving. For example, the nation's K-12 education system is increasingly expecting teachers to work with an expanding and diverse group of colleagues, including social workers, counselors, mental health professionals, parent activists and policymakers. These broader societal and systemic influences require individuals with collaborative problem solving, shared



goals, flexible decision making, appreciation of disciplinary roles and skill sets, and effective communication skills.

### **What are the benefits of interdisciplinary service-learning?**

Integrating service-learning and interdisciplinary learning can provide far reaching benefits to students, communities and campuses.

**Student impact:** College and university students report the development of key skills and attributes resulting from their participation in interdisciplinary service-learning, including gaining the ability to think beyond traditional academic disciplines and being more adept at integrating and applying what they are learning. Interdisciplinary service-learning introduced in the early years of study can help to foster the contribution of positive attitudes about working in communities and in teams.

**Community impact:** Community partners report greater understanding of resources available across the campus that can be marshaled to support and address community identified problems when more than one discipline is involved in a service-learning partnership. They also report that interdisciplinary student involvement allows a wider range and higher quality of services to be provided. Community partners report developing their own knowledge and leadership skills when working with an interdisciplinary team of service-learners.

**Faculty impact:** Faculty report greater time demands and attention in establishing interdisciplinary service-learning programs. However, this can be balanced by the new relationships formed with faculty from other disciplines and new areas of interdisciplinary scholarship that emerge.

### **Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Models**

Below is a list of schools that employ a wide range of models, including curricular, co-curricular and student-led. For descriptions of these programs go here [www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/he\\_facts/interdisciplinary/expanded.php#models](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/he_facts/interdisciplinary/expanded.php#models)

*Portland State University*  
*Evergreen State College*  
*Ohio State University*  
*Kennesaw State University*  
*Elmhurst College*  
*Purdue University*  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*  
*Pennsylvania State University*  
*State University of New York at Stony Brook*  
*Indiana University*  
*University of New Mexico*  
*Eastern Carolina University*

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*For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at [www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/he\\_facts/interdisciplinary/expanded.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/he_facts/interdisciplinary/expanded.php)*

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