

Risk Management for University Sponsored Service-Learning Activities

Prepared by the Volunteer and Service-Learning Center
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Mission of the VSLC

The mission of the Volunteer & Service-Learning Center is to engage students in effective volunteer and service-learning activities in order to strengthen communities, promote an enduring commitment to civic responsibility, and enhance the academic experience.

Goal of this Document

Reduce risk associated with service-learning activities.

Related Objectives

- Educate faculty, students and community partners about risk management policies and procedures
- Increase use of liability insurance provided by VSLC
- Annually update MoU's held between the VSLC and appropriate community partners
- Continue to offer Service Opportunities Guide, highlighting community partners approved by the VSLC
- Minimize risk through ongoing evaluation and open communication
- Maintain a Loss Reporting File in the VSLC

Preface

Service-learning, when well executed, can provide opportunities for meaningful teaching and learning, as well as beneficial outcomes for community organizations. It is a valuable pedagogy, but like many other university sponsored activities, it carries with it a potential for liability. This document is designed to help service-learning stakeholders reduce risk before out-of-classroom learning takes place. All stakeholders should make efforts to limit reasonably predictable risk or liability before, during and after service-learning activities. Stakeholders include the VSLC, students, community partners, faculty and their sponsoring departments.

The information included within this document is general, and applicable to most service activities. The VSLC encourages further conversations between stakeholders on a course-by-course basis to determine additional liability and to implement appropriate risk prevention strategies. While liability and risk cannot be eliminated, they can be minimized through purposeful planning, strong partnerships, open communication and ongoing assessment.

Preparation

Proper planning plays a significant role in reducing risk associated with service-learning activities. Before engaging in service-learning activities, stakeholders should participate in conversations to discuss matters such as proper syllabus construction, community partnerships, funding, reflection and more. Many of these matters are discussed in greater detail later in this document, however, the following are basic preparatory steps appropriate to most service-learning activities.

- Begin basic planning one semester to one year in advance. Basic planning may include goal setting, reviewing comparable courses, exploration of funding opportunities, syllabus construction, etc. Faculty seeking a service-learning course designation should visit the VSLC Website for application deadlines and paperwork. Applications are reviewed one semester in advance.
- Meet with the VSLC staff to gather information about resources, applicable workshops, community partners etc. The VSLC staff can identify course appropriate community partnerships, provide sample reflection materials and syllabi, provide free liability insurance, assist with documentation, and more.
- Meet with selected community partners prior to the start of the semester. Community partners should have a basic understanding of the course goals and objectives, and a thorough understanding of goals related to the service-learning component. Both faculty and community partners should understand each other's expectations, including those for and of the students, and what each hopes to gain from the partnership. This is a good time to discuss communication preferences, safety, funding and more.
- Assess risk associated with selected activities and identify appropriate risk management strategies. Areas that generally need to be assessed include transportation, confidentiality, personal safety out of the classroom, training, and background checking. If students will need background checks, immunizations, or driving records, it is important to agree who is financially responsible for such safeguards, as well as what action will be taken if a student fails to pass such a safeguard.
- Determine if the liability insurance provided by the VSLC is appropriate coverage for your service-learning activities. In the event that your students will require professional liability coverage, or more than \$1 million dollars in liability, contact Risk Management at 328-2010.
- Schedule an Introduction to Service-Learning presentation for your students. You can present introductory material to your students or schedule the VSLC staff to do so. An introductory presentation should, at a minimum, cover liability insurance, transportation, dress codes, tips for success in community partnerships, emergency procedures and reflection. The introduction should also clearly define service-learning, and differentiate it from voluntary service, internships and other forms of experiential learning.
- Finalize your syllabus, including all relevant service-learning activities, expectations, goals and objectives. Provide both students and community partners with copies of the final syllabus for reference.

Insurance

The Volunteer and Service-Learning Center provides a free, \$1 million insurance policy for students. This policy includes general liability while students are actively engaged in service activities. The VLSC recommends every student enrolled in a service-learning course be covered under this policy. To register, students must fill out a brief registration form on OneStop. Students must only fill out the registration form once during their academic career at ECU. Students who have not submitted a complete registration form are NOT covered under the policy.

Community partners may also provide liability insurance for persons participating in service through their organizations. It is recommended that any documents related to a community partner's insurance be reviewed before asking students to assume coverage under their policy.

Exclusions to the VSLC insurance policy are listed below.

• The VSLC insurance policy does NOT cover students serving with volunteer fire departments, EMT services, or students providing any type of advanced medical or professional care or expertise. These activities require professional liability coverage not included in the VSLC policy. For more information about professional liability coverage, contact ECU Risk Management at 328-2010. Additional exclusions include:

- Injury or damage resulting from the use of an automobile, aircraft, or watercraft (except non-owned water-craft);
- Errors or omissions in connection with the registered volunteer's professional services;
- Personal injury resulting from an assault or battery committed by or at the direction of the volunteer;
- Property damage to property in the care, custody or control of the registered volunteer, and;
- Injury or damage by any person who is part of, or associated with, a work release or court-ordered program.

The VSLC insurance policy is valid when the registration form is returned to the VSLC. The policy remains valid until the student separates him or herself from the institution upon graduation or withdrawal. The VSLC insurance policy cannot replace professional or general liability policies required of student interns. Claims must be made through the VSLC. Individuals needing to make an insurance claim should contact the VSLC as soon as possible. In the event that a student is not insured under the VSLC policy, liability can fall back to the instructor, their department, or the community partner. The VSLC is not liable for uninsured students.

Community Partnerships

Community partners are typically non-profit, government and human service agencies. A service-learning partnership should benefit both the student, by addressing their educational objectives, and the agency, by providing a needed community service. The VSLC maintains strong relationships with more than 100 local and state organizations, many of whom have experience working with service-learning courses. To be a partner with the VSLC, these organizations must:

- Pass an annual site visit with the VSLC Community Partner Coordinator;
- Annually sign a memorandum of understanding;
- Provide training and supervision of ECU service-learners and/or volunteers;
- Maintain regular communication with the VSLC, especially during times of transition and increased need;
- Attend at least 2 VSLC sponsored events during the year to maximize familiarity with policies, procedures and best practices relevant to service-learning and college-aged service providers.

Faculty and students are strongly encouraged but not required to utilize these vetted community partners for service-learning endeavors. The Center is more than happy to identify and vet additional partners needed for service-learning activities if given proper notice. If a faculty member or student selects to work with a community organization that does not have a formal relationship with the VSLC, the Center cannot account for that organization's ability to safely and effectively support service-learning activities.

When forming partnerships with community organizations not vetted by the Volunteer and Service-Learning Center, it is important to have a thorough conversation about risk before commencing any service-learning experience. Appropriate community partnerships for service-learning should include at least the following:

- A point of contact experienced in the agency mission, goals, and practices. This is usually an executive director, board member, or volunteer coordinator;
- A safe, clean location where ECU students will receive training, provide direct service, have meetings, interviews, etc. Under no circumstance should the main headquarters be a personal residence;
- A training program for students and staff that includes (at a minimum) education, emergency/safety procedures, dress codes, disciplinary rules, contact information and a question and answer period;
- Supervision. Students should not be responsible for opening and/or closing facilities, driving clients, or facilitating programs/clinics/activities without guidance and direction from a paid staff person or faculty member;
- A written, signed agreement between the organization and faculty member which dictates the expectations of each constituent;
- Plan of action in the event an unsafe condition arises. This document should be readily available to all constituents;
- A plan for assessment to evaluate performance, satisfaction and effectiveness of the relationship.

Identifying safe community partnerships for Distance Education (DE) students can be especially challenging because site visits and face-to-face meetings are inconvenient due to proximity. Despite the challenge, constituents should still take reasonable steps to limit risk. The VSLC recommends the following:

- Use the VSLC database listings, local United Way affiliates or nationally recognized organizations with set program standards such as Habitat for Humanity or Boys and Girls Clubs of America for community partnerships;
- Maintain a record of all community partner contact information including the address, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address and site supervisor of each community partner served by DE students;
- Inform the VSLC of DE partnerships, so the Center can formalize relationships for future collaborations;
- Provide each community partner with a copy of the course syllabus and faculty contact information;
- Maintain regular communication with students (and community partners when possible) regarding preparedness, training, organization, and the general service experience. This can easily occur through reflection, class discussion, e-mail, or Black Board check-ins. Do not assume no news is good news!
- Consider requiring a signed agreement dictating the expectations of each constituent;
- A plan of assessment to evaluate the performance, satisfaction and effectiveness of each relationship;
- A final reflection or debrief, to determine if this partnership may be a valuable option for future DE students.

Faculty teaching face-to-face courses may find the recommendations above helpful for maintaining local community partnerships. Additional best practices for maintaining successful partnerships in service-learning are available from the Volunteer and Service-Learning Center.

Supervision

Faculty should regularly evaluate the service-learning experience and provide supervision of any ongoing projects. A lack of faculty supervision and management can result in poor outcomes for students and community partners. Ensure students are on task, meeting expectations and behaving professionally at all times. As a reminder, faculty (and their departments/colleges) can be named in lawsuits, so it is important to play an active role in ensuring safe experiences for students and community partners. Ongoing supervision may include:

- Regular contact with partnering organization(s), including at least three planned conversations: one prior to the semester, one in the middle of the semester, and one at the conclusion of the semester.
- Appropriate student preparation and oversight. This includes educating students about service-learning, ensuring students possess the academic knowledge required to complete service activities, and providing assistance and troubleshooting as needed.
- Reflection that is continuous, challenging, connected, and contextualized (Cress, 2005, p.83). Reflection provides a safe environment for students to inform faculty of both positive and challenging developments. Student learning, performance, safety, service milestones, and more can be addressed.
- Periodic site visits to observe the interactions between students and community constituents. Some faculty choose to serve alongside their students, but this can be a burdensome activity when students serve with multiple organizations. Planning at least one brief site visit per organization allows faculty to observe students in action, demonstrate commitment to the partner, and rest assured students are serving in a safe location.
- Formal post-service experience evaluation. The VSLC provides post-service surveys.

In the event that a potentially unsafe condition arises, all constituents should be aware of the appropriate action plan to avoid further complication. Appropriate documentation of the risk and any associated actions and losses should be recorded as soon as possible. If a claim needs to be made with the VSLC insurance policy, the individuals involved should call or visit the Center as soon as possible following the incident.

Orientation

Plans should be in place to provide students with a service orientation prior to their first visit to a community site. Proper orientation minimizes risk by preparing students for service. It also gives students the chance to voice their questions and concerns. Orientation should include at least the following:

- Introduction to service-learning pedagogy;
- Review of service related course requirements/syllabus;
- Introduction to relevant community partners/service. Students should be educated about their community sites prior to engaging in service. This includes providing students with the mission, a description of the service to be performed, contact information for the community partner, and directions to the service site.
- Skills training. Students should be imparted with the knowledge necessary to complete the assigned service. For example, service-learning students expected to tutor children should receive training regarding confidentiality, dress codes, appropriate vs. inappropriate tutor-tutee relationships, basic tutoring skills, and the topical knowledge to be able to provide effective tutoring. This educational training may happen in the classroom under supervision of the faculty member. The community partner may visit the classroom to provide the necessary training, or the student may receive it on site.

- Registration with VSLC for liability insurance;
- Safety tips and risk management practices;
- Documentation procedures. All service-learning students should maintain an accurate log of time spent in the community or on related projects;
- Emergency contact information and procedures.

Communication

Frequent communication is key to reducing risk during service-learning experiences. Students, faculty and community partners should have regular discussions to identify concerns and address issues as they arise. All constituents should share contact information prior to the start of any service-learning experience. Regular in-class reflection sessions provide a neutral environment to air concerns.

Criminal Background Checks

The VSLC does not provide criminal background checks for service-learners. Faculty and community partners should work together to determine the need for criminal record checks, especially in cases where students may be paired with vulnerable populations (some community partners require a federal/state/local/sex offender check, available for approximately \$25 through the Dean of Students Office). Students are generally responsible for the cost of background checks, which are valid for one year.

Should a service-learning student be identified as having a criminal background, the VSLC, Dean of Students office, faculty member and community partner should work together to determine if the student is 1) eligible to remain at ECU and 2) eligible to engage in the service activity.

Confidentiality

Some service-learning experiences place students in situations where they will view, interpret, and/or examine personal data. Steps should be taken to ensure the confidentiality of personal information. No names, phone numbers, addresses, personal or family challenges, employment information, living habits or medical histories should be disclosed outside the scope of the service-learning project. Students, community partners, faculty and the person(s) being served should adhere to confidentiality expectations set for the project.

Photography

ECU faculty and students should have conversations with their community partners before taking photos or video on site. Many organizations require written consent from residents/ parents/ clients before images can be taken. ECU faculty and students should read and uphold image releases carefully. For example, if a release states that photos and video may be used for marketing purposes only, students should not post images to their personal Websites or social networking sites. A generic image release can be obtained from the Volunteer and Service-Learning Center upon request.

Documentation

Faculty should keep a loss-reporting file for each service-learning endeavor. This file should contain records of any accidents, safety violations, training and/or orientation schedules and agendas, along with reports of any necessary corrective actions. If claims are made involving the VSLC insurance policy, copies of all documents may be required by the Center. Students should also be required to document their service hours throughout the semester on a VSLC provided time sheet. Those time sheets should be submitted to the VSLC no more than three days after close of grades during any given semester.

Transportation

The VSLC does not carry automobile insurance on our students. The VSLC strongly recommends against having students drive clients, or other students in their personal vehicles. If this action is deemed necessary to the success of the service activity, additional actions to limit risk should be taken. Contact the VSLC for more information.

The VSLC does not check students driving records. It is the responsibility of faculty, students and community partners to assess risk associated with travel by personal vehicle to and from service sites. Many, but not all, community partners are accessible by the ECU bus lines, or are within safe walking distance of main campus. Please contact the VSLC if you have questions about these partners. If you or your students will be driving a university-owned vehicle or community partner-owned vehicle during a service-learning experience, actions should be taken to limit risk, including obtaining driving records, proof of insurance, and appropriate training and certifications. University travel forms should be used when appropriate. The VSLC also has a generic travel release for students.

Risk Management Quick Reference for Students

- Have a clear understanding of your academic and service objectives
- Fill out a VSLC registration form before beginning service hours
- Choose a community partner who has needs within the scope of your skills and objectives
- Create a plan to complete your service objectives
- Become familiar with the environment at your community site
- Become familiar with the needs of the people/animals/environment you are serving
- Get to know your site supervisor
- Keep your faculty, site supervisor, and VSLC contact information with you
- Become familiar with policies, procedures and etiquette specific to your service site
- Be mindful of your health and safety at all times; make safe decisions
- Limit risk during travel
- Read all waivers and contracts before signing. If you do not understand a waiver or contract, consult a trusted source
- Do not perform services outside your scope of ability
- Do not handle money at your service site
- Do not perform service if you are not under the supervision of a paid staff person
- Do not open or close a community partner site
- Respect the confidentiality of all information you encounter
- Do not share your personal information or property
- Avoid transporting clients from your service site
- Be prompt; give at least 24-hours notice if you must miss scheduled service hours
- Keep an accurate log of your service hours, detailing the dates and times of service
- Do not report to your service site under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- If you are sick, do not report to your service site until you speak to your supervisor
- Be mindful of your personal belongings at all times
- Inform a friend, roommate, parent or other trusted source of your service schedule; share site contact information with them
- Avoid one-on-one service in isolated rooms; leave doors open so that others will be aware of your presence and actions
- Do not perform service in personal residences unless approved by your instructor and community site supervisor. Address additional related risks.
- If you have any doubts about your safety, or the safety of others, speak with your site supervisor, faculty member, or VSLC staff person
- Report any suspicions of abuse, neglect, or criminal activity to your site supervisor, faculty member and VSLC staff person immediately
- Be flexible, courteous, and open-minded
- If you intend to volunteer with your site after you have completed service-learning course requirements, it is best to meet with your site supervisor to discuss new goals and tasks, sign new agreements, etc.

Risk Management Quick Reference for Faculty

- Document service-learning courses with the VSLC
- Make use of VSLC resources available to ECU faculty including workshops, service-learning orientations, etc.
- Include a comprehensive description of the service-learning experience in the syllabus; if interested, apply for the service-learning designation
- Discuss all service-learning goals and objectives with students and community partners prior to beginning the service experience
- Provide students with an orientation or preparation session prior to the start of service. This may occur in the classroom, at the community site, or during an online VSLC orientation session
- Register all students with the VSLC insurance plan prior to the start of service
- Avoid the use of community partners not vetted by the VSLC
- Get to know the community organizations collaborating with your course
- Provide community partners with your contact information
- Try to visit community partner sites at least once during the course
- Provide regular opportunities for students and community partners to voice their opinions and concerns
- Engage students in regular reflection to assess preparation, learning, performance, comfort levels and satisfaction
- Be aware of your students service responsibilities with their community site
- Do not ask students to perform service outside the scope of their ability
- Choose only community partnerships with service needs relevant to the academic goals and objectives of the course
- Incorporate post-service evaluation into your course schedule
- Be informed of best practices in service-learning risk management
- Be aware of incidents affecting the areas where your students serve
- Address all issues of concern in a timely manner
- Report losses to the appropriate parties as soon as possible
- Report any suspicions of abuse, neglect, or criminal activity immediately
- If your students intend to volunteer with their community sites after completing their service-learning objectives, encourage them to document their hours and meet with their site supervisor to set new goals related to their volunteerism

Risk Management Quick Reference for Community Partners

- Ensure all ECU service-learners (and volunteers) have filled out and submitted a VSLC registration form
- Be familiar with the VSLC insurance policy; carry additional coverage if necessary
- Partner only with service-learning courses whose academic objectives match the needs of your organization; request a syllabus
- Invite faculty for a pre-partnership meeting and site visit
- Match student skills with appropriate service activities; interview as necessary
- Provide clear service objectives; job descriptions may be necessary
- Provide students with an orientation/training prior to the start of service. This should cover (at a minimum) education, emergency/safety procedures, dress codes, disciplinary rules, contact information and a question and answer period
- Background check service-learners as necessary
- Discuss service schedules and expectations before students begin service
- Provide supervision for students at all times during direct service
- Maintain a healthy, safe, and harassment free environment for service-learners
- Have at least one paid staff person certified in First Aid/CPR
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand and post emergency procedures
- Ensure both service-learners, staff persons and clients are aware of emergency procedures
- In the event of an emergency, ECU students should not be responsible for moving medically fragile persons without proper training
- Discuss expectations for communication between students, faculty and your organization
- Verify and sign student time sheets; check regularly and keep copies
- Protect the individuals and animals served by your organization; discuss confidentiality, photography, and videography procedures with students, faculty and clients
- Do not ask students to handle money
- Do not ask students to transport clients
- Do not ask students to open or close your organization
- Be aware of incidents affecting the geographic area around your organization
- Address all issues of concern in a timely manner
- Report losses to the appropriate parties as soon as possible
- Report any suspicions of abuse, neglect, or criminal activity immediately
- Have a termination policy for service-learning students; keep faculty informed of student performance
- If students intend to volunteer with your organization after completing their service-learning responsibilities, set new goals and schedules
- If you are not a formal partner with the VSLC, contact the Center to set up an appointment to meet with the Community Partner Coordinator

Contact Information

Volunteer and Service-Learning Center
Service-Learning Coordinator- Jessica Gagne Cloutier
Community Partner Coordinator- Shawn Moore
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http://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/campus_operations/risk_management/index.cfm

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