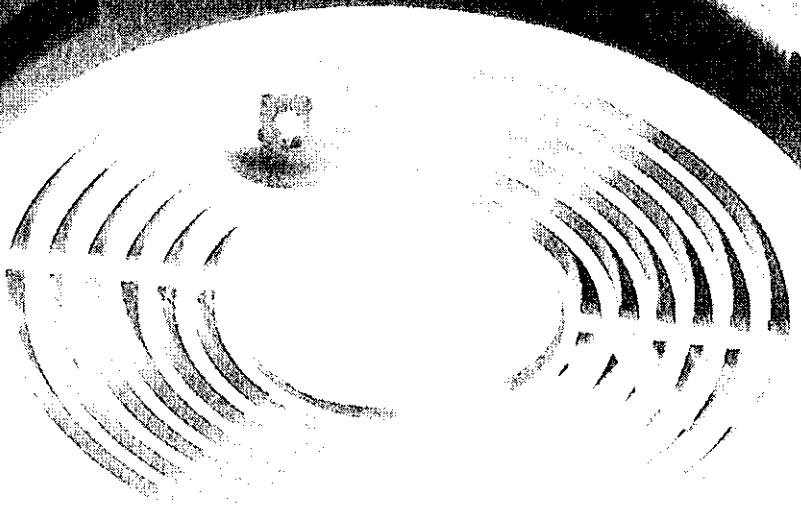


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Introducing Community Service Learning

This is an article about community service learning in schools. It discusses how community service learning can be used as a component of criminal sentences and juvenile adjudications involving diversion, probation and parole. It also mentions that community service learning supports principles of balanced and restorative justice by helping address victims' needs, repairing community harm and encouraging offenders to become positive and active members of their community.



Community Service 101

Court-mandated community service is one of the most frequently assigned sanctions handed out by justice professionals in the United States. According to definitions of community service listed under "Promising Practices," in the National Institute of Justice's *Restorative Justice Online Notebook*, "community service is effectively used in all 50 states and at the federal level as a component of criminal sentences and juvenile adjudications involving diversion, probation and parole." (Maloney, NIJ 1998-99) Clearly, mandated community service plays a prominent role in the probation and parole process, as it does in the larger justice community.

Why is community service so popular? Many justice professionals believe that court-mandated community service has value beyond punishment. They know that well-planned and implemented community service can provide offenders with a method to "give back" to those they have harmed. They believe that, with this "giving back" approach, community service supports principles of balanced and restorative justice by helping address victims' needs, repairing community harm and encouraging offenders to become positive and active members of their community.

by Charles Degelman, Carolyn Pereira and Scott B. Peterson

School-Based Service Learning

If mandated community service carries this restorative potential, how might justice professionals improve the quality and impact of their community-service sanctions? One answer lies with a school-based teaching strategy called *service learning*.

Many educators believe community service has value as a learning tool. Schools use service-learning projects and programs to link classroom study with projects designed to address school or community problems. Many teachers believe that service learning can help their students learn more about curricular topics while it helps them develop critical-thinking and problem-solving skills and recognize the value of constructive change within a community. Service-learning projects can strengthen young peoples' sense of their own effectiveness and help them develop meaningful relationships with local government, businesses and community members outside their own peer and cohort groups.

Just what is service learning? According to Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) Chicago (1994), in their pamphlet "Service Learning in the Social Studies," service learning...

...is a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that...

- *Meet actual community needs;*
- *Are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community;*
- *Are integrated into the curriculum;*
- *Provide structured time for a young person to think, talk and write about ...the actual service activity;*
- *Provide young people with opportunities to use ...academic skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their communities;*
- *Enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom; and*
- *Help to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.*

How do we know that service learning is effective? Alan Melchior conducted an independent, three-year evaluation of the service-learning components of Learn and Serve America's School and Community-Based Programs. Melchior's report (Melchior, 1998) found that service-learning programs have a positive impact on young peoples' civic and educational attitudes and school performance while they meet community needs.

In an independent evaluation of the Constitutional Rights Foundation's *CityWorks*, a supplemental service-learning oriented

curriculum about local government, evaluators Joseph Kahne, Bernadette Chi and Ellen Middaugh found that "the *CityWorks* curriculum promoted greater commitments to participatory citizenship, *justice-oriented citizenship* and interest in service than non-*CityWorks* classes." (Kahne, et al 2002)

These studies reveal that service learning has enjoyed measurable success as a teaching aid while it fosters notions of civic responsibility and meets real community needs.

What's the difference between community service and service learning? While fulfilling a court-mandated sanction, respondents might, for example, remove trash from a local streambed. In this capacity they are providing a community service.

By comparison, when students in a science class study water pollution; identify it as a problem with causes and consequences; implement a plan to remove polluting trash from streambeds; design a presentation to share the results of their research and practice with residents of the neighborhood; and develop long-range strategies for reducing local pollution, they are providing a community service and engaging in an educational process—hence, the term *service learning*.

A Service-Learning Project Profile

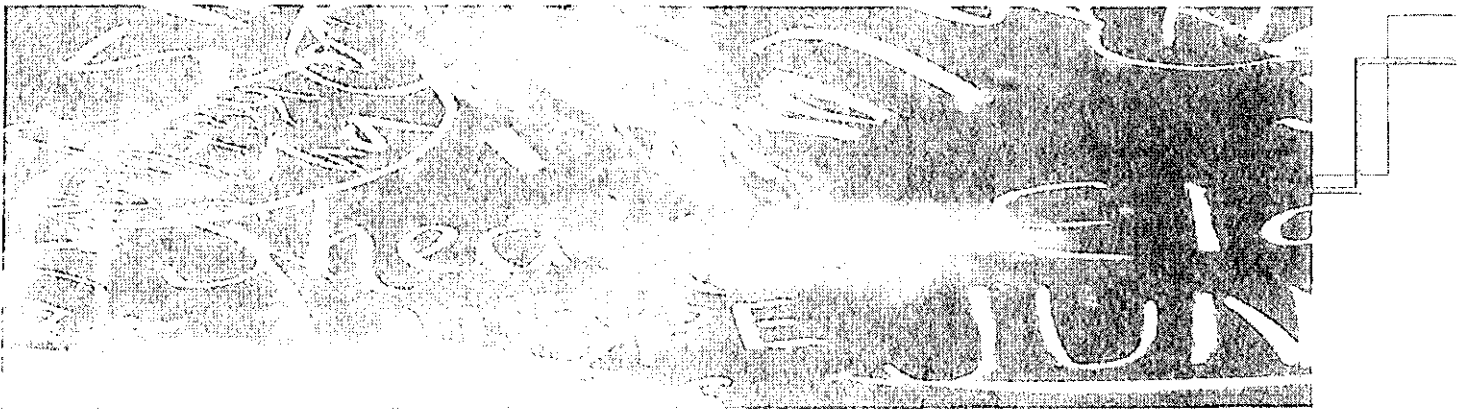
To begin a school-based, service-learning project, San Antonio social-studies teacher Joseph Kulhanek asked his high school students to define their community. (Kulhanek, 2002) These classroom discussions led students to identify differences between their own school and community and other San Antonio neighborhoods. Wishing to bridge the gap between themselves and other San Antonio students, they reached out to form a partnership with a school from a less affluent neighborhood. The two schools began working on a series of videos about community history, city planning and public housing. They presented the videos and the information they had gathered to other schools, local government officials, law enforcement agencies and the community at large.

According to teacher Kulhanek, "these first-hand experiences enabled students to escape the four walls of their classroom and interact with a larger world. Classroom study extended into the real world, with suburban kids interacting with inner city kids, local government, businesses and the media to create projects aimed at improving both their communities."

If service learning can be effective in schools, how might it be applied to justice settings? The answer lies in a methodology called *community service learning* (CSL).

What is Community Service Learning?

Community service learning differs from school-based service learning because it places special emphasis on the needs of the courts, offenders and the specific characteristics of their offenses. With community service learning, court-mandated community service can incorporate certain school-based teaching goals, methods and strategies to meet the specific needs of our judicial systems.



Obviously, a typical justice organization with a broad agenda and limited resources cannot put the kind of attention into a service-learning project that a school can. However, community service learning can become a practical approach for justice agencies. Why? According to *Giving Back: Introducing Community Service Learning*, CSL shares many goals and objectives with balanced and restorative justice (BARJ). (Degelman, et al, 2006) Specifically, when properly applied, community service learning can enable offenders to:

- Understand the legal and judicial system.
- Repair harm that offenders have inflicted on victims and the community.
- Evaluate their own needs and the needs of others, specifically of victims and the community.
- Develop skills and competencies that will help them become responsible and productive citizens.
- Understand the impact their actions have on others, specifically, victims and the community.
- Identify and act upon opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their families, schools, peer groups and communities.
- Develop a personal stake in the future of their communities.
- Learn about the specific laws that pertain to their crime, offense or violation.
- Understand possible future consequences that could result from their arrest and or conviction.
- Increase life and coping skills.

How can a court-based community service project or program achieve these goals and objectives? Fortunately, justice professionals can turn to an already functioning juvenile-justice model to help them introduce the “learning” into their community service programs. Currently, over 1100 youth courts are registered with the Federal Youth Court Program (FYCP). According to the FYCP, 99 percent of these youth courts use community service as a sanction and many of them actively integrate recognizable “learning” components into their community-service programs. (Fisher, 2003)

How do we know this? A national study, “The Impact of Teen Court on Young Offenders,” conducted by Dr. Jeffrey Butts and colleagues at the Urban Institute, found that the application of community service

in youth courts coincided with lower recidivism rates than were found in youth courts using more traditional sanctions such as incarceration or probation. (Butts, et al, 2002)

How do we know that youth courts are incorporating learning components into their community-service programs? Although the results are inconclusive, the Urban Institute study does list factors found in youth-court community service that may help reduce youth court recidivism rates and qualify under the community service-learning goals and objectives outlined above. For example, youth courts often promote volunteerism, thus more effectively connecting young people to their communities; youth court respondents and volunteers learn about the legal and judicial system and about the specific laws that pertain to their offense; youth court participants tend to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, helping them interact positively with adults, their peers, their community and society as a whole.

A Youth Court Community Service-Learning Profile

The East Harlem Youth Court handles low-level cases including truancy, shoplifting and public drinking. They focus on respondent offenses and typical learning-oriented sanctions include anger-management workshops, letters of apology and directed community service.

In 2006, CRF’s *Service-Learning NETWORK* conducted interviews with staff members at the center that houses the East Harlem Youth Court. According to Program Director Ray Barbieri, 94 percent of the court’s mandated participants complete their sanctions and more than 50 percent continue their involvement with the court as volunteers, thus encouraging mentoring opportunities. (Barbieri, 2006)

In order to further emphasize the “learning” element of their community-service projects, the East Harlem Youth Court allows high levels of youth participation and decision making. Projects are often implemented through partnerships between the court and local schools, businesses and faith-based organizations. They introduce respondents and young volunteers to the legal and judicial system and the need for the rule of law. They educate respondents about the specific laws they have violated and their rights as citizens and teach young offenders about the impact of their actions on others. The recidivism rate among participants in the East Harlem Youth Court’s

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community-service projects is currently at 13.7 percent, significantly lower than the national average for that age group. (Barbieri, 2006) Efforts such as the Harlem Youth Court demonstrate how community service learning can be introduced into already existing community-service programs: apply to a wide range of offenses and sanctioning needs; introduce respondents and young volunteers to BARJ goals and objectives; and improve visibility in the community by demonstrating to the public that justice systems can be fair, effective and humane.

Putting the "Learning" into Probation and Parole Community Service

If community service learning can potentially generate these restorative elements in youth courts, how can probation and parole departments take advantage of community service learning? The chart below indicates several possible "overlaps" that link the goals and objectives of balanced and restorative justice to the goals and objectives of probation and parole agencies.

Community Service Learning "Overlaps"

- **Balanced and Restorative Justice** seeks to "help young offenders, victims and other participants to understand the legal and judicial system."
- **APPA** works to "raise crime-prevention awareness through community involvement."
- **Balanced and Restorative Justice** strives to "identify the causes and effects of community problems."
- **APPA** resolves to "consult with the community as a source for problem solving strategies that highlight education and awareness."
- **Balanced and Restorative Justice** works to "develop competencies that will enable respondents to become responsible and productive citizens."
- **APPA** works to "guide youth toward active citizenship in their communities."

Giving Back

Just how practical is it for a busy probation and parole agency to consider introducing learning components into their community service? Anticipating the need for a direct, flexible approach to

community service learning, the OJJDP has introduced a handbook for juvenile-justice supervisors and respondents. The manual, *Giving Back: Introducing Community Service Learning*, is designed to serve as a resource for adapting community service-learning methods to a broad range of juvenile-justice agency needs, including probation and parole departments. (Degelman, et al. 2006)

Published by the CRF in Los Angeles and Chicago with a grant from the OJJDP, *Giving Back* draws upon CRF's extensive experience in the fields of service learning and law-related education to provide methods and materials designed to engage justice professionals, juvenile offenders and volunteers in meaningful community service-learning activities.

Using the *Giving Back* handbook (now in its second edition), justice agency supervisors and case workers can assign simple, flexible methods that enable participants to explore their community, identify its problems and implement projects for addressing ten of the most predominant juvenile crimes. Because *Giving Back* community service-learning projects are simple and flexible, agencies can also use many of the same exercises to deal with other offenses as well.

How Does Giving Back Work?

How would a probation and parole agency use *Giving Back*? The APPA suggests that agencies "strengthen links between court, family and community and guide young people toward active citizenship in their communities." Correspondingly, *Giving Back's* "What's a Community?" provides methods and materials for participants to discuss the meaning of community, the purpose of community service and how they—and their community—will benefit from building community awareness.

The APPA suggests that agencies "contribute to crime-prevention efforts originated within the community, particularly those incorporating community problem-solving strategies." In "What's the Problem?" *Giving Back* offers a reading about crime as a community problem. Participants then discuss the problem of crime in terms of causes and effects and brainstorm a list of crime problems they think are important.

The APPA suggests that agencies "implement policies and practices to create a fair, just and safe society where community partnerships embrace a balance of prevention, intervention and advocacy." As described earlier, partnerships such as these provide a valuable resource for putting the "learning" in community service. In

"Building Your Own," *Giving Back* offers options for participants to plan and implement community action projects that can strengthen court and community partnerships. For example, "Volunteering" projects provide methods for participants to "plug into" a community-service agency.

Giving Back's "Teach-In" projects provide participants with teaching methods and strategies to address issues of crime and crime prevention to younger students. A well-designed Teach-In project can help participants develop problem-solving and communication skills as they interact with younger students and teachers and gain knowledge about a specific topic related to their own offense.

In keeping with the APPA's guiding goals, objectives and strategies, *Giving Back's* "Done in a Day" section provides simple projects that participants can complete with relatively little supervision. These projects are organized under ten common juvenile offenses: theft, vandalism, substance abuse, disorderly conduct, assault, curfew, truancy, criminal mischief, harassment and animal neglect.

For example, *Giving Back's* projects for the offense of theft are designed to help youth participants develop a deeper understanding of theft, specifically shoplifting and its causes and effects. In one theft project, participants talk to owners or managers of local stores to find out about the impact of shoplifting and write a letter to the editor of the school or local paper about the subject. The object of this project is to raise young people's awareness of the impact of shoplifting on offenders, victims, and the community.

As an important component in *Giving Back's* CSL process, participants are given as much responsibility as possible in the planning and implementation of their action project. This helps offenders gain confidence in reaching out to the community, thus building civic participation skills. For example, to research the topic of shoplifting, participants are encouraged to make their own appointments to talk local store managers to find out about shoplifting and its consequences. They prepare questions about shoplifting and how it impacts businesses and the community and then interview their subjects. Using resources in the manual, participants then write a letter about shoplifting and its consequences on victims and the community.

After the letter is reviewed by their supervisor, participants send a copy of the letter to the editor of their school or local newspaper and complete a reflection component that helps them identify what they learned and how it affected them. *Giving Back* is available in free, downloadable pdf format from:

- Constitutional Rights Foundation www.crf-usa.org/YouthCourt/GivingBack_home.html
- The Federal Youth Court Program www.youthcourt.net/publications/GivingBack_2006_final.pdf

Court and Community Partnerships

Community service-learning efforts benefit greatly from interaction between court and community partnerships and dovetail nicely with

existing parole and probation approaches to community service. According to the APPA, partnerships lie at the core of court-community crime prevention. Accordingly, court and community partnerships can be of great service to the implementation of community service learning.

- APPA stresses in its vision statement the necessity "to create a fair, just and safe society where community partnerships embrace a balance of prevention, intervention and advocacy."
- **Balanced and Restorative Justice principles** support the notion that participants can make meaningful contributions to their schools and communities and community service learning objectives include forming "meaningful working relationships with community groups and individuals."

Sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships allow agencies to avoid wasting time and energy on repetitive searches, introductions and partnership growing pains. With sustainable partnerships, courts using community service learning can focus on developing activities that are more responsive to the needs of both their courts and the community partners who are providing the service.

Generally, court-community partnerships can help develop fruitful two-way relationships between respondents, agencies and the communities they serve. Working with active citizens can give probationers and parolees a sense of validation and strengthen belief in their personal effectiveness. For community members, community service learning helps them understand the contributions that young people, even charges of the court, can make to the well-being of the community and that local justice systems can have a positive impact on victims, offenders and the communities they serve.

Reflection and Evaluation

Service learning stresses another component that is highly relevant to justice settings—reflection. According to "Reflection: K–12 Service-Learning," (Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2003), reflection in service learning can be defined as "the use of creative and critical thinking skills to help prepare for, succeed in and learn from the service experience and to examine the larger picture and context in which the service occurs." Similarly, reflection in a justice setting can help offenders realize the significance of their actions; that they have vital connections to their community; and that they can serve a useful role within it. In this way, reflection can promote positive knowledge and skill development factors that can help reduce recidivism.

Conclusion

Community service learning is a flexible process that combines the best of school- and justice-based methods and experience. Properly designed and implemented, community service learning provides well-tested methods to identify real community needs and come up with ways

to address those needs with the active participation of the courts, the schools, businesses, non-profits, local government agencies, offenders, victims and concerned citizens.

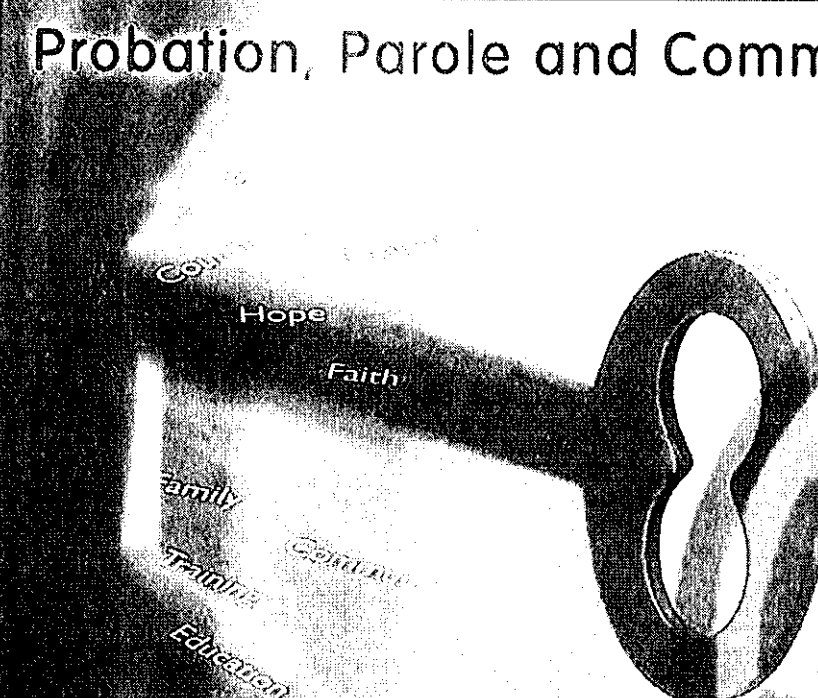
With *community service learning*, respondents can explore their potential as citizens by helping communities meet their educational, public safety, human and environmental needs. With *community service learning*, respondents become resources who provide service, rather than recipients who are always in the role of being served. Hopefully, by planning and implementing well-designed goals objectives and strategies and building and sustaining court-community partnerships, justice practitioners can help young offenders become better citizens while they "give back" to the community. ▲

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