

Part Two: Getting Started

Most service-learning courses require a specific number of service hours, generally a minimum of 20 hours, which must be completed throughout the entire semester (in other words, one cannot wait until the end of the semester and try to get all the hours in at once). It is your responsibility as a student to choose an appropriate community agency in which to complete your service. Your professor will provide a list of appropriate community organizations and/or appropriate service activities. Once you have received that information you will need to do the following in a timely manner:

Choose a Community Agency

One of the most important parts of a service-learning experience is choosing the right placement. The agencies listed for your course were identified based upon the match between the course objectives and the community needs. The agencies approved by your professor have been contacted and are looking forward to working with students in your class. But how do you choose between them? Before you make any attempts to contact the agency, try to assess your fit with the community partner in the following ways:

- **Location.** Are you able to get to the agency? Will you be able to drive, use public transportation, or walk?
- **Hours.** Are you able to serve during the agencies hours? Pay attention to both the days and times the agency is open and when they need volunteers.
- **Cause.** Consider choosing an agency that addresses a cause or issue in which you are particularly interested or an issue that you would like to learn about. If there is a web page listed, visit the site to learn more about the agency.
- **Requirements of the agency.** Is the agency looking for a specific type of person? Not everyone can complete service at every agency. Agencies may request a specific type of student (e.g. particular majors, willing to make a long-term commitment, or those with previous experience with a similar agency). Some have minimum age requirements (often 18 or 21 years), and others cannot accept individuals with certain types of criminal records. If there are no provisions listed for the agency or you are not sure if you fit their requirements, be sure to talk with the agency contact person.

Contact the Community Agency

Once you have identified an agency, it is important to contact the agency to set the application process in motion. It is critical that you complete all application forms and procedures fully and in a timely manner. The screening and training that is required before placement by many agencies can take several weeks, and missing forms and/or delays on your part can make it difficult, if not impossible, for you to successfully complete the service-learning requirement of your class. This would ultimately affect your success in the course.

It is also important for you to follow up with the agency. Do not be afraid to be proactive! If an agency contact person is unavailable when you call, ask for the best time and way to reach him or her. It is also important to leave a detailed message. If you cannot reach the individual in person, leave your name, purpose of the call, and how and when they can best reach you. If you leave a message and do not hear back from the contact person within 24-48 hours, try calling again. If there are other methods of contacting the agency (i.e., e-mail addresses, fax numbers), you should attempt those as well. If you have tried to contact the agency using all available means and still are not able to make contact with the agency, notify your professor and/or the Center for Community Engagement as soon as possible. Remember, non-profit organizations are often short staffed and extremely busy. Always, therefore, call during the hours of operation listed on your contact sheet.



Complete Required Procedures

Once you have contacted and committed your semester of service to an agency, it is important that you meet all their requirements. Application forms, background checks, orientations, and/or training must be completed and/or reviewed before your first day of service. Failure to complete required tasks before your start date will delay your beginning of service. It is essential, therefore, that you know exactly what is required, and when.

The requirements of the agency may be especially rigid if your learning placement will involve working with what is considered to be a “vulnerable population.” This term is generally used for those who are under the age of 18, disabled, and/or elderly. If your service involves working with any person who is part of a vulnerable population, the organization may require that you get a background check, DMV report and/or TB test before you begin service. Such precautions are state mandated to protect the individuals you will serve as well as for your own protection. Always ask the agency where you need to go to complete testing to ensure speedy processing, and how long it will take for clearance. Background checks can take as little as one to two days, but can also be delayed as long as a month! This is generally outside of the agency’s control, but obviously can have a serious impact on your ability to successfully complete your service-learning. This is one reason to not delay in your application process.

CSULB Requirements. In addition to the application process required by the community-based organization, you are required to complete a *CSULB Community Service Learning—Learning Plan*. This document serves to

- Provide you, your professor, and the community agency a common understanding of the learning objectives relating to your service and agreed-upon service activities and responsibilities.
- Provide the agency and your professor with emergency contact information
- Provide you with guidelines relating to your placement.

The agency, you, and your professor should agree upon the learning objectives and service activities. All three parties should sign the Learning Plan, and all should keep copies of the Plan. The Learning Plan can be obtained from your professor or downloaded from the CSLC web page, and must be completed prior to your first day of service.

If not required, you are strongly encouraged to attend the CSULB “Preparation for Service-Learning” workshop during the first few weeks of the semester, as well as other workshops and activities sponsored by the Center for Community Engagement. Visit the Center for Community Engagement’s website for the current schedule of workshops.

Criminal Background Checks are required in some instances by state law. If the agency asks about any convictions and you have a criminal record:

- Be honest. Failure to state convictions that are then uncovered in a background check will likely result in your immediate dismissal from your service organization.
- Ask the agency representative to explain what types of convictions are not acceptable (these often involve convictions such as those involving violence, drug sales, and/or crimes against minors).
- If you believe that your record will disqualify you from a particular service-learning placement, it would be wise to pursue another placement option.
- If you would not be accepted at any of the approved placements sites, discuss alternative placement options with your professor. You do not need to share the details of your conviction with your professor.

TB (Tuberculosis) Screening

This is a simple, two-step process that can be done at the CSULB Health Resource Center for a small charge (approximately \$2). The test is placed on your arm, then you return within 72 hours to be checked for any reaction. That’s all!

If you have ever received a positive TB test, you must obtain a chest x-ray instead of the TB skin test.

Testing positive does not necessarily mean you have TB! Most often, it means you have been exposed at some time in your life and your body carries TB antibodies.

For more information, contact the CSULB Student Health Resource Center at (562) 985-4609