



Volunteering, Service Learning, Civic Engagement, Public Scholarship – What Does It All Mean?

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Volunteering is the choice to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one's basic obligations. Volunteering activities are typically “one and done” events that a person may or may not repeat. Examples of volunteering include sorting clothing, donating blood, and removing litter along a stream.

Service learning is a teaching method that combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on reflective thinking and civic responsibility. The service is directly related to the academic material of a course or field of study and provides students with structured opportunities for critical reflection on their service experience. The work students do in the community help inform their learning in the classroom and they in turn take skills and ideas that they learn in the classroom with them as they work in the community.

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. It includes a wide spectrum of public interactions that makes it possible for citizens of all ages to participate in decisions and actions to improve the life of their communities.

Service learning and civic engagement are not the same in the sense that not all service learning has a civic dimension and not all civic engagement is service learning. For definition's sake, civic engagement is the broader motif, encompassing service learning but not limited to it. One useful definition of civic engagement is the following: individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement encompasses a range of specific activities such as serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting. Indeed, an underlying principal is that an engaged citizen should have the ability, agency and opportunity to move comfortably among these various types of civic acts.

Public scholarship reframes academic work as an inseparable whole in which the teaching, research, and service components are tested separately to see how each informs and enriches the others. Faculty members especially use the integrated whole of their work to address societal needs. Scholars and artists at colleges and universities leave their campuses to collaborate with communities. They explore multidisciplinary issues such as citizenship and patriotism, ethnicity and language, space and place, and the cultural dimensions of health and religion. Then they create innovative methods and vocabularies for scholarship using cutting-edge technology, pursuing novel kinds of creative work, and integrating research with adventurous new teaching strategies.

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