SERVICE-LEARNING BEST PRACTICES:
CREATING A SERVICE-LEARNING GRADING RUBRIC

A well-structured grading rubric can clarify what is expected of students and how they will be held accountable, dispel any confusion or anxiety about service-learning, and reinforce the role of service-learning in your course. With pre-established expectations, you and your students can spend the semester focusing on the substance of service-learning, rather than addressing issues of miscommunication and accountability.

➔ For more information on troubleshooting in the grading process, see *Service-Learning Best Practices: Addressing Challenges in Student Evaluation and Accountability.*

Principles of Evaluating Student Service-Learners

- As in any course, evaluation focuses on students' ability to meet course learning objectives. Students should be graded for their learning, not their service.[1]

- Ideally, students' grades shouldn't be separated into "just service" grades and "just learning" grades. When service is fully integrated into the course—so that students' learning is optimized—it should be difficult to parse out the grade value associated with service from the value associated with academic course content.

- The full integration of service-learning does *not* mean that your grading rubric should be vague. In fact, because service-learning can depart from what students are accustomed to, it is even more important than ever to supply clear grading criteria for the assignments that ask students to draw upon observations and learnings from their service experiences.
   o In addition, the grading rubric should be structured to hold students accountable for their service responsibilities, since service is the vehicle through which learning takes place.
   o *For Project-Based S-L:* You may or may not choose to grade students for group meetings, community partner communication, and other aspects of service along the way. Regardless, you can grade students on their final, tangible project deliverables, which demonstrate what students have learned.

- Evaluation should reflect students' ability to learn through service, thus deepening their grasp of the course content. Ask yourself: How will students in your course be required to demonstrate, and earn credit for, connections between service and course content?

- Set standards in advance. The more structured, specific, and concrete the grading rubric, the better.
   o Provide examples of past student work if possible, so that students understand what merits a high grade.

> "This course allowed me to apply the theories, the knowledge and the skills to real world situations. I began to understand the value of this type of work. My Service-Learning experience has not only helped me find my passion for social work, it opened doors to many opportunities." –S-L Student, Spring 2011

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[1] Jeffrey Howard, *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning: Service-Learning Course Design Workbook*, University of Michigan: OCSL Press, Summer 2001.

Components of the Grade

- *Major Assignments:* Whenever possible, papers, presentations, and test questions should provide students the opportunity to connect their service experiences to the course content. This requirement should be written into the criteria for the assignment.

- *Supporting Reflection Assignments:* Blogs, reflection papers, and class discussions, assigned throughout the semester, should use guided questions to compel students to think critically about their service and its connections to course content. [see best practices for blogging; also best practices for assignments]

- *Additional Feedback:* Since faculty members cannot monitor all aspects of the S-L experience, Community Partner Evaluations and S-LTA feedback provide valuable insight into students' performance. Student self-evaluation or peer evaluation may also be used. Feedback may address the following:
  - Is the student serving consistently and exhibiting professional behavior?
  - Is the student taking initiative and seizing upon opportunities to learn through the service?
  - If the student has not fulfilled service requirements, could the student have done more to make the best of the situation or was it truly beyond the student's control?

- *Compliance with the Service-Learning Process:* Points can be awarded or taken away for logistical requirements, such as: handing in forms on time; communicating with the faculty, S-LTA, and community partner; and completing the S-L Program Evaluation at the end of the semester. These requirements should be treated the same as all other assignments. This accountability greatly smoothes the S-L process.
  - To help with accountability—and aid us with tracking—the S-L program can provide timesheets that are filled in by students, signed by site supervisors, and submitted to the faculty member and/or S-LTA.

➔ For examples of grading rubrics, see *Service-Learning Best Practices: Integrating Service-Learning into the Course Syllabus* as well as the collection of sample syllabi on our website, www.neu.edu/servicelearning.

> "In order to support NEU students in… deeper learning, I require them to post to a S-L Discussion board using a What, So What and Now What structure… The more the students practice reflecting in this format, the more able they are to separate what they are observing from how they are reacting to and making sense of what they see. The discussion board provides a place for students to slow down and notice their reactions, judgments, and interpretations, not to make them right or wrong, but to see them and be able to reflect upon them… Over the weeks posting, I find that more and more students are asking each other questions that invite a new perspective or extend a classmate's thinking rather than simply rushing to give advice. Instead of just dropping in the name of a reading, students start to use them to question their own and each other's understandings of interactions and dilemmas at their sites. It is exciting to see the students engage their own and each other's questions as they learn to reflect on their S-L experiences and discover the power of being a teacher who is also a learner." –S-L Faculty Member Polly Atwood, Fall 2010