

Calvin College Service-Learning Center *Strategic Plan, 2009-2014* Serving to Learn – Learning to Serve

Context Statement

Since 1964, the Calvin College Service-Learning Center has placed student volunteers in the Grand Rapids community and has been a consistent, thoughtful participant in the on-going work of service and learning in the Grand Rapids non-profit, educational, healthcare, and social justice communities. The Center began as a student group known as KIDS (**Kindling Intellectual Desire in Students**) not only during the turbulent years of Civil Rights, Vietnam War, and feminist movements, but also when the College migrated from a small, landlocked urban campus to a sprawling suburban estate campus. In 1980, as a response to the expansion of the KIDS program beyond its original roots as a tutoring program in core city public schools, the KIDS program became **Student Volunteer Services** and was enfolded into the administrative structure of the Student Affairs Division of the College. A little over a decade later, after attending a Campus Compact seminar at Brown University, a small yet influential cadre of faculty members agitated for a further expansion for this office, suggesting a practice they called “academic-based service,” something that would extend the reach of SVS into the realm of classroom teaching. The adoption of academic-based service prompted another re-naming of the office, and, in 1993, SVS became the **Service-Learning Center**. Of note is that with each change in the Center’s identity, its former emphases were not eliminated but rather were expanded. As result, the current context in which the Center finds itself is a complex one with remarkable depth and breadth, and with reach that includes the disparate spheres of student service and leadership, faculty scholarship, community engagement initiatives, and international service and learning. The catch-phrase “**Serving to Learn, Learning to Serve**” has long been a succinct motto summarizing the reciprocity involved in the activities of the Service-Learning Center.

Mission

Our mission is to engage and equip Calvin College students, faculty, staff, community partners, alumni and other friends of the college in and for the pursuit of God’s shalom in our learning together, primarily through community-based service-learning, social justice activity, and civic participation in Grand Rapids and other partner communities.

Vision

In 2014, the Service-Learning Center will be a central academic office within Calvin College that provides the college community and its partners with pedagogical, program, and philosophical support that encourages students to become agents of renewal in the academy, the church, and society, particularly through the means of reflective and reciprocal community service-learning.

Calling

As the Service-Learning Center seeks to embody this vision, we acknowledge our calling to demonstrate faithfulness to the following constituencies:

- Calvin College students, faculty, staff, and alumni
- Local and global community partners
- The body of Christ
- Higher education colleagues engaged in service-learning and civic engagement

Core Values

The following are things about the Calvin College Service-Learning Center that need to be maintained or strengthened:

- A. **We value our past, present, and future as a student-centered office situated within a liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition.** We endorse our reformed theological identity and our roots in the 1960s student movements for social change, and we see a need for this particular voice in the context of global Christian and public higher education. Our particular history as a student movement, and our unique religious heritage have given us many of the strengths that have led to the vibrancy of this particular educational and intellectual project.
- B. **We value student learning in the context of service, creativity in teaching and learning, and experiential education.** The primary thrust of our work is educational, building on both a strong theoretical understanding of the value of experience for deep learning and a clear Biblical understanding of the integral relationship between faith and service. Our many years of experience enabling enhanced teaching strategies via thoughtful and reciprocal service partnerships has developed deep roots in and a strong commitment to engaged scholarship.
- C. **We value reciprocal relationships with our various constituencies.** Our work gains strength and credibility from our strong link to local community agencies, schools, churches, government services and citizens, the faculty and staff of the college, students, the local church, and from engaged citizens and active alumni throughout the world.
- D. **We value racial reconciliation, the development of cultural intelligence, and intentional efforts toward an anti-racist climate on campus and in the city of Grand Rapids.** We affirm and support the College's decades of efforts to become more diverse and its many years of intentional anti-racist efforts, believing that deep engagement in service interactions with our partners in many diverse social, ethnic, and socio-economic situations can enhance the College's efforts to begin to loosen our students and ourselves from the binding curse of both individual and systemic racism.
- E. **We value our place.** We are located in a city large enough to provide extensive educational opportunities, active community partnerships, ethnic and racial diversity, and a rich cultural context. But the city is also small enough that our presence can make a difference. We are able to take educational advantage of urban, rural, lakeshore, and forest environments in close proximity to the campus. We have multiple colleges and universities for current and potential partnerships.
- F. **We value social justice and environmental sustainability.** We recognize fundamentally that all is not as it should be in the world, and that renewal and transformation are necessary for a mutual flourishing of humanity and creation. We encourage our constituents to consider justice and mercy together and to consider care for creation an act of Biblical justice as well as stewardship.
- G. **We value the future of the Calvin College Service-Learning Center.** We want to assure a strong and healthy future for the Service-Learning Center. We are committed to a structure and to practices that maintain our core strengths, even when we are creatively pushing into new programs. Therefore, a significant challenge going forward is for the Service-Learning Center to learn how to prioritize, and, at times, to say no to new opportunities.
- H. **We value our campus community.** We view the work of service-learning and civic engagement as more than peripheral to the mission of the college. Our vision of our work is very collaborative, with many partners, both internal and external to Calvin College.

Summary of Current Programs

Academically-Based Service-Learning – Since 1993 the college has provided logistical support and pedagogical assistance to faculty interested in teaching in collaboration with local community partners, utilizing community service-learning to deepen students' learning in particular areas. On average, 60-70 courses per year include academically-based service-learning options.

Student leadership – Each year approximately a dozen student coordinators are trained to run essential community programs on behalf of the college. The students receive intensive training and mentoring that contributes to their personal and professional development. A resulting network of S-LC staff alumni around the world provides an impressive array of meaningful work and study options for Calvin students with hearts and minds intent on “doing God’s work in God’s world.”

StreetFest – As a part of the three-day orientation for new students, Calvin has hosted this annual event since 1993. Working to embody the “doing God’s work in God’s world” portion of the college’s mission statement, StreetFest takes students off campus into the surrounding community to work with over 60 agencies, organizations, and churches in Grand Rapids’ many neighborhoods. Many of these partnerships have been in place for years, and StreetFest is one way to acquaint students with Calvin’s longstanding history of service in community and its relationship with the people of Grand Rapids.

Residence Hall Community Partnerships - Each residence hall maintains an ongoing service-learning partnership with an area organization or program. Many students, for example, regularly volunteer their time tutoring or planning after-school activities as a part of these partnerships. Community Partnership Coordinators (CPCs) are students who have committed to organizing the service-learning opportunities with their hall's community organization.

Spring Break Trips – During the college’s week of spring vacation, each year 6-8 groups of students, accompanied by a staff or faculty mentor, partner with an agency or church to provide needed construction, clean-up, or programming assistance. These trips are often to long-standing partner agencies or to areas with recent natural disasters. Strong efforts to provide accompanying cultural and reflective learning allow some students to gain core Cross-Cultural Engagement credit through participation on these trips.

Blood Drives, Food Drives, Special Olympics and One-Time Opportunities

Several annual, or regular activities have become traditional over the decades of S-LC partnerships in Grand Rapids. Four blood drives are hosted annually during the academic year, in partnership with the Michigan Community Blood Centers. The college is a strong contributor to the annual County-Wide Food Drive in October, primarily through the work of the residence hall community partnership coordinators. The West Michigan Special Olympics have held their spring Olympics on Calvin’s campus for many years, necessitating over 200 student volunteers. And on a regular basis, students are placed in a wide array of agencies for one-time service opportunities.

Calvin Environmental Assessment Program (CEAP) – Since 1998, the CEAP program has primarily provided opportunities for faculty in the hard sciences to integrate ABSL into their teaching. At the end of each semester, the CEAP Poster Session hosts a visiting lecturer and showcases a plethora of academic posters detailing the service-learning research undertaken by these students that often measures the environmental impact of the college on its local area.

Faculty scholarship – In partnership with the Office of Academic Community Engagement, the S-LC provides encouragement to faculty for turning service-learning assignments into scholarly pursuits, either in the area of conference presentation or writing projects.

International development, service and mission – The S-LC has maintained an active conversation with the Calvin Office of Off-Campus Programs to better enable service-learning efforts while students live and study abroad. In 2006, S-LC Director Jeff Bouman presented the results of his research with a summer student McGregor researcher at an international conference in Granada, Nicaragua. In 2007 and 2008, he traveled with students to Mexico and Romania respectively, teaching Interim courses that deepened students' understanding of social service delivery and the use of service-learning to bring about social change. In addition, seven college scholarships that financially reward students who spend time in summer missions experiences, or who are deeply involved in their local neighborhoods.

Research, writing, and conference presentations – The S-LC maintains an active involvement with the state and national Campus Compact organizations, and has had a contributing presence at the national conference of the National Society for Experiential Education.

Social justice and student activism – The S-LC has been active in providing opportunities, both locally and nationally, for students to participate in larger faith-based movements for justice. Recent trips have taken student groups to Birmingham, AL, and to New York City and the United Nations. In addition, S-LC director Jeff Bouman has been teaching an interdisciplinary course on the topic of "Reformed Activism" since 2005.

Transportation – Two cars and a small cadre of student drivers provide a limited shuttle service during the week to and from local placements. In addition, students are reimbursed for mileage in their own vehicles, and RAPID discount bus cards are distributed, along with maps and advice, in our office.

Website and electronic discussion boards – Each week a new listing of service opportunities in the local area is sent to approximately 1,000 students and staff. In addition, an electronic, searchable database of service opportunities is maintained on the S-LC website. Also, a virtual conversation/blog is ongoing at the following URL:
www.servicehyphenlearning.blogspot.com

Goals and Strategic Priorities

1. ***Regular communication with community partners, and with existing college personnel and offices that maintain close ties to local agencies.***

Communication is essential to the valued reciprocity the S-LC has developed over many years. Active partners each have files, both physical and electronic in the S-LC. These files often become outdated quickly, and are difficult to keep up to date, as a single agency may have multiple connections to different departments on campus. In addition, turnover in leadership in non-profit agencies is typically high, making it difficult to maintain a current knowledge of the agencies goals and programs. Student and professional staff members also come and go, making a system of record-keeping that transcends any single individual's memory essential. The S-LC must develop a structure that enables face-to-face and electronic communication to be easily connected to programs and processes. To this end, we will develop a Community Advisory Board able to provide consistent and timely feedback and vision for our programs.

2. ***Provide meaningful community service-learning opportunities for every faculty member wishing to engage with this pedagogical resource. This will require extensive communication with faculty.***

Faculty colleagues are at many different places on the spectrum of experiential and service-learning. The S-LC, and particularly the director, will need to remain involved in facilitating all of these levels, from the beginner to the expert. To this end, we will initiate a Faculty Advisory group to better connect with and serve both new and veteran faculty.

3. ***Provide student leadership development and service opportunities.***
We will continue to provide a high quality student leadership experience for 9-12 students each year, and high quality service-learning experiences for the general student body.
4. ***Improve evaluation and data management processes and initiate scholarship that examines and explains service-learning outcomes.***
Feedback loops will be completed between evaluation processes and programming efforts. Survey instruments will be developed that enable a program of research that measures outcomes of service-learning in the areas of general learning, faith development, cultural competence, and a commitment to civic engagement/social justice.
5. ***Streamline the process of service-learning.***
Many of the systems that are in place for student participation in, and the college's subsequent tracking of service-learning can be improved. This can be accomplished with more appropriate attention to the use of the web for communication, evaluation, and reflection purposes. We will develop materials that better prepare students for their arrival at local sites, and that better guide them in the process of reflection. In addition, we will maintain a database that provides a record of past service as well as an accurate directory of existing agency partners and their opportunities for student community service-learning.
6. ***Improve connection with off-campus study programs.***
An intentional conversation regarding the place of service-learning among Calvin students studying abroad or away from campus domestically has only just begun. Service-learning is a natural pedagogy to link with off-campus study. To this end, we will work toward more intentional relationships with existing Calvin study abroad programs, and have established deep ties between Calvin, Northwestern College, and the work of the New Horizons Foundation in Romania.
7. ***Deepen intra-college partnerships with academic departments, student life units, and other administrative areas.***
Given the breadth of the mission of the S-LC, a variety of partnerships within the college can better enable its work. Particularly in the areas of deeper learning, cultural competence, anti-racist attitudes, and faith development, these partnerships will be essential.
8. ***Growth of the S-LC endowment.***
We will make successful application for State of Michigan dollars, as well as for private donations to invest in a growing endowment committed to the long-term success of service-learning efforts at Calvin.

Conclusion

In order to best “engage and equip Calvin College students, faculty, staff, community partners, alumni and other friends of the college in and for the pursuit of God’s shalom in our learning together,” the Service-Learning Center must tend to its core values and tighten its administrative practices. The strategic goals and priorities in this plan will better enable the Center to “provide the college community and its partners with pedagogical, program, and philosophical support that encourages students to become agents of renewal in the academy, the church, and society, particularly through the means of reflective and reciprocal community service-learning.”

Appendix A

SWOT analysis of Service-Learning at Calvin College

Strengths

- Outstanding student leaders and a student body inclined to connect faith, study and service
- Professional and competent staff
- Long tradition and history
- Programs represent a diverse range, from academic to developmental
- Solid partnerships in the local community
- Agency partners who understand the vision and process
- Faculty buy-in pedagogically and philosophically; particularly strong connections with CEAP, and the Nursing, Education, Social Work, and Spanish departments
- Institutional support from the central administration, the Student Life Division, and the Academic Affairs Division – a healthy budget
- Strong connections to student groups advocating for justice
- Reputation nationally and internationally
- Local endowment
- Twin emphases on service and learning translate into an easy parallel with the college's chief goals of being distinctively Christian and academically excellent

Weaknesses

- Data management processes – difficulty tracking student and agency participation
- System of imparting the threats and value of S-L to participants
- Feedback loop from evaluation to improvement
- Dependence on transitory population of student leaders
- Communication with community partners
- Communication with faculty “seekers”
- Misperceptions in the general college community regarding S-LC purpose and structure
- Too many students leave Calvin without significant community service experiences
- Process of reflection/educational follow-through not always a tight connection

Opportunities

- International S-L conversation
- Deepening faculty scholarship around S-L
- College efforts in the areas of diversity, racial reconciliation, environmental sustainability, cultural engagement, and off-campus learning
- Strong collaborative partners in Student Development – particular opportunity to strengthen programming and leadership development models for residence halls leaders
- Strengthen local partnerships and develop community feedback loop through an Advisory Board
- Michigan Campus Compact support systems – grants, conferences and programs
- Teagle grant activity and resulting interest in *place* among students and faculty
- Enhanced college presence in downtown Grand Rapids, particularly in the Avenue of the Arts, Project Neighborhood, and the Ladies Literary Society building
- Open Associate Director position in 2008-09 for re-visioning process
- Specific social justice/civic participation opportunities for students connected to service-learning
- Better marketing plan for both internal and external constituents

Threats

- Misperceptions of S-L among participants and constituents, both internal and external
- Time – too many divergent commitments
- Budget constraints are a potential threat
- Shifts in student interest
- Safety or other liability/risk issues are potential threats
- Transient student staff members with significant program responsibilities